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Graduate Program in Theory and Criticism
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts
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SCULPTED SELVES, SCULPTED WORLDS: PLASTICITY AND HABIT IN THE
THOUGHT OF CATHERINE MALABOU

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Thomas Wormald

Graduate Program in Theory and Criticism

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

One of the contemporary trends marking our current moment in theory is the call for the elaboration of ‘new’ materialisms. The new materialisms, however, have taken two principal articulations: a Neo-Spinozist materialism read through the work of Gilles Deleuze, represented by thinkers such as Elizabeth Grosz, Jane Bennett and William Connolly and a Neo-Hegelian materialism read through Jacques Lacan, represented by figures Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek and Adrian Johnston. Concomitant with this return of materialism has been a resurgence in the topic of habit as a topic worthy of philosophical investigation. There is, however a division in the treatment of habit between the two camps. Habit is deemed positive by the vitalist materialisms influenced by Spinoza and Deleuze – illustrating the self’s continuity and openness to the outside – but neglected by the Neo-Hegelian materialisms of Badiou, Žižek and Johnston as an instance of the political quietism of the ‘micropolitical’. Contemporary French philosopher Catherine Malabou, typically associated with the figures of the Neo-Hegelian camp, elaborates a different materialism based on the principle of plasticity developed through not Hegel and Lacan, but Hegel and Heidegger and thus sits liminally between the two dominant materialist orientations. This thesis will elaborate Malabou’s ontology of plasticity and argue how a reading of habit through Malabou’s plastic rapprochement of Hegel-Heidegger offers a different perspective on habit as a critical ethico-political modality that can helpfully negotiate some of the binaries or impasses that mark contemporary ongoing debates in the interrelated fields of ontology and political theory

Keywords

Catherine Malabou, plasticity, habit, materialism, ontology, Hegel, Heidegger, subjectivity, politics, affect

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To Elaine, thank you for making me first realize that thinking matters and that the distance between the page and one's life does not have to be a distance at all. But, it is precarious and infinitely difficult task to take care of keeping that space as small as one can. I've tried, remembering you, to do that here.

To Chris, I thank you for your guidance, seemingly endless encouragement and for your patience in our conversations throughout this process. When I wanted to try and do everything, you gave me the rope to do so. When I tangled myself up with it and felt lost, you told me I could find my way out. Thank you for insisting that what I most needed to do was get out of my own way. Hopefully this bears out that I have – at least a little bit.

To my friends, if you read this, and see yourselves here, it's because you are: much of this was written in conversation with – and, probably to my fault, more accurately, speaking at – all of you. For every graciously lent ear over every bent elbow, I've been inspired, grateful and lucky to spend my time.

Mom and Dad, I could try to say thank you, but it would never be enough.

And, lastly, to Sea: your patience with me borders on beatitude.

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List of Abbreviated Titles

Catherine Malabou:

Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy – CD

“Conversation with Catherine Malabou” (2008) – “CWM”

Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity - OA

Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction – PDW

Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and Neuroscience - SEL

The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, Dialectic – FH

The Heidegger Change: On the Fantastic in Philosophy – HC

The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage - NW

What Should We Do with Our Brain? – WB

G.W.F. Hegel:

The Phenomenology of Spirit - PS

The Philosophy of Mind - PM

The Philosophy of Right - PR

Introduction

One of the contemporary trends marking our current moment in theory is the call for the elaboration of ‘new’ materialisms. If Edmund Husserl’s famous dictate was a return to *things* themselves, the mid to late twentieth in France a return to *language* itself, the call to return to *culture* itself in the eighties and nineties in North America, the present moment is punctuated by exhortations to return to the *world* or *matter* itself. This turn is precipitated by a uniformly admitted exhaustion with previously existing dominant textually and culturally oriented theoretical practices that failed to, as proponents of these new paradigms suggest, sufficiently attend to the agency or independence of materiality itself. It is also arguably occasioned by the slow-setting melancholia of processing the various deaths we have witnessed in the past century: the death of God, the death of the Subject, the death of Metanarratives, the death of Communism. The return to materialism occurring today may be an indication of our actual acceptance, registering and working through how to adequately conceptualize existence in an immanent real bereft of transcendent certainty.

The twofold difficulty that accompanies such a characterization is, however, the rather conflicting array of claimants propounding their own specific variety of ‘materialism’ and, attendently, the consequent indeterminacy of what is actually announced under the invocation of ‘materialism’ in the clamor of so many contesting voices. In surveying contemporary critical literature, however, discernible co-ordinates for marking out discrete trajectories in this conflicted milieu of new materialism are emerging, evincing ultimately two principal orientations that Adrian Johnston helpfully characterizes as an “infra-materialist antagonistic division” between Neo-Hegelianism and Neo-Spinozism or the axes of Hegel-Lacan and Spinoza-Deleuze (“Interview with Adrian Johnston on Transcendental Materialism”). The former, the contemporary Hegelian camp, proffer a materialism predicated on a commitment to materialist accounts of the *subject* via a reactualization of German Idealism, primarily G.W.F. Hegel, through the psychoanalytical framework of Jacques Lacan, the macropolitical ambitions of Karl Marx and engagements with the sciences as represented by figures such as Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek and Adrian Johnston. The latter, contemporary Deleuzo-Spinozists, pursue avowedly posthumanist materialisms premised on the rejection of the *subject* through a solicitation to attend to an agentic and re-

enchanted *substance* and ignored the vital materiality of life – of which the human is just one part – eschewing macropolitical ambitions in favour of micropolitical initiatives via a syncretic retrieval of thinkers such as Baruch Spinoza, Henri Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche as read through the work of Gilles Deleuze, as well as Michel Foucault, in tandem with developments in the natural sciences as represented by figures such as Elizabeth Grosz, Jane Bennett and William Connolly.

Concomitant with this return of materialism has been a resurfacing of the topic of habit. With the recent publication of the first substantial anthology dedicated solely to the concept, entitled *A History of Habit: From Bourdieu to Aristotle* (2013), along with a special issue of journal *Body and Society* (2013) devoted specifically to exploring habit, there are signs of a recent resurgence of interest in habit as a topic worthy of philosophical exploration in contemporary continental philosophy. To say that there has been a lack of interest in thinking about habit would be misrepresentative given that various fields such as psychology and importantly for today, advertising, as well as a host of other empirical disciplines such as sociology, biology, zoology, neurology, have long been engaged in researching the phenomenon of habit in the constitution, production and maintenance of both organic and inorganic entities and processes. However, the return of habit as a concept of philosophical importance in the realm of continental theory marks a decisive break in a kind of sclerosis concerning how the notion has been principally configured and treated within this philosophical discourse, exhibiting a renewed sensibility that something may be both ontologically and politically at stake in how we codify, construct and hold ourselves in relation to the idea of what habit actually is and means in our social and intellectual imaginary.

The current futures of both habit and materialism are thus, presently, open, in a process of de-sedimentation and re-sedimentation, and as such, sites of contestation over precisely what these concepts mean or entail. What is striking, however, is the discernible congruity between how the two concepts are being genealogically constructed and coded within emerging contemporary theory. In fact, what evinces itself is that both habit and materialism are cut down the middle in a homologous fashion by contemporary theorists into two traditions marked by the same theoretical demarcations and trajectories. Habit is divided into two traditions which Elizabeth Grosz nicely summates: there is a “wayward tradition” of a

“philosophy of life that runs through the work of Felix Ravaisson, Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze”, a lineage that, Grosz writes, “if stretched backward, would also have to include Aristotle, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume and others”

[where] habit is regarded not as that which reduces the human to the order of the mechanical, as in the works of, for example, Descartes, Kant and Sartre, but rather as a fundamentally creative capacity that produces the possibility of stability in a universe in which change is fundamental (219, 233)

Here, then, we can align Grosz’s organizing gesture¹ with the two materialist orientations which Johnston characterized as Neo-Spinozist and Neo-Hegelian: on the one side, there are the thinkers of substance – Bergson, Deleuze, Spinoza – who construe habit positively as an ineluctable part of life, and on the other there are the thinkers of subject – Descartes, Kant and Sartre – who see habit as something which must be overcome as it limits the autonomy of the self. While Grosz is essentially correct in her taxonomy, her characterization of the way these two traditions of thought relate to habit requires some qualification. The Neo-Spinozists positively construe habit at the *ontological* level because it demonstrates a continuity of the human with its material environs; but habit indicates a passivity that undermines the notion of autonomy that undergirds the classical subject. That is, habit is affirmed because it “grounds us in a firmly pre-representational real, a real made up of forces that stimulate and transform living beings” (Grosz 218), meaning, it demonstrates that the subject is not its own ground, but rather that something precedes us that permits us to exist: the passive ontological contraction of habits, at the level of the material body. However, what Grosz occludes is while ontological habit is recognized positively, those following Deleuze’s Neo-Spinozism do not affirm habits at the socio-political or normative level, but precisely seek to escape or break them. That is, in terms of worldly actuality in the form of socio-political mores, values or forms of organization, habit is a mode of arborescence, a

¹ This is a gesture repeated by both Clare Carlisle in “The Question of Habit in Theology and Philosophy” and Simon Lumsden in “Habit and the Limits of the Autonomous Self”. Carlisle connects the negative conception of habit with Descartes, Kant, Kierkegaard and Sartre (31, 49) and the positive appraisal with Ravaisson, Paul Ricoeur, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the new vitalism of Bergson and Deleuze, and in the American pragmatism of William James and John Dewey (49-50). Lumsden corroborates this genealogy of Deleuze, Bergson and Ravaisson (63).

mechanism of territorialization that captures the virtual fluxes, intensities and affects of becoming. The Neo-Spinozist thus politically prescribes the micropolitical practice of pursuing ‘lines of flight’ that elude the re-territorializations of habit in the form of the dominant socio-political world. They seek to enjoy ‘brief habits’ but never substantively re-instantiate new habits at the level of the socio-political because the objective world – or the State, in Deleuze – is an *a priori* mechanism of capture – it is only something to be fled. The other tradition identified, represented by a line of Descartes, Kant and Sartre, leads to the present Neo-Hegelian materialisms of Badiou, Žižek and Johnston, who do defend the subject and thus construe habits in their normative, socio-political sense to be a detriment to the individual if one merely passively acquiesces to one’s given situation. They agree that habits of organizing and thinking about being-in-the-world – such as the hegemony of contemporary late capitalism – are apparatuses of capture that can thwart the freedom and well-being of individuals. However, following the dialectical materialism of Marx, they posit that the habits of the socio-political world can be transformed if they do not contribute to the flourishing of human well-being; but they eschew the micropolitical prescriptions of habit formation in favour of advocating large-scale structural change as they construe the micropolitics of habit to be merely an instance of insular, pseudo-subversion that leads to political quietism instead of actual societal transformation.

The thought of Catherine Malabou, however, troubles this bifurcated organization. Malabou is frequently grouped along with the Neo-Hegelianisms of Žižek and Johnston, and, while her thinking is certainly congenial to their respective projects given the centrality of Hegel to her own intellectual itinerary, it is not strictly coincident with them, diverging in important respects. Particularly, Malabou is distinguished from other these contemporary Hegelianisms in regard to the significance of a micropolitics of habit to the intelligibility of the socio-political implications of her project. Žižek and Johnston strictly disavow the political efficacy of micropolitical habits associated with figures like Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault – which they construe as insular, complicit reformism - eschewing them in favour of ‘thinking big’ as Johnston puts it, advocating “revolutionary macropolitics” (158). However, Malabou’s own new materialism grounded in an ontology of plasticity shows that a Hegelian and Heideggerian informed micropolitics of habit is not only possible, but arguably necessary to adequately conceptualize and possibly enact socio-political change.

This thesis will then elaborate Malabou's new materialism of a plasticity of being *qua* being and demonstrate how habit plays a pivotal role in making the emancipatory nature of plasticity that Malabou envisages actualized and effectual. I argue that plasticity is strictly an ontological principle that simply means, following Malabou, Being's ability to receive, give and annihilate form. As such, what Malabou's materialist vision of plasticity amounts to is a demonstration of the nature of Being as the ability to change: Being, as such, is merely material possibility. This materialist vision of plasticity prohibits any claims to transcendent necessity as there is nothing outside of the immanence of matter or Being, meaning that nothing needs to be the way it is. While plasticity thus provides an ontological check to any ideologically naturalizing socio-political formations – such as contemporary late capitalism – it provides only that: the promissory knowledge that things can be different. To actualize plasticity, meaning, how we can put plasticity to work, is through the operation of habit which Malabou calls the “instrument” of plasticity. Habit is the means by which we sculpt the marble of existence that is plasticity, shaping ourselves and world through our own activity. As such, micropolitical practices become essential to achieving any kind of sustained new shape of life because, like the plasticity of the brain, new connections, new modes of organization only emerge with coordinated effort and practice. Through the analogy of sculpting the plasticity of one's self and one's world, Malabou demonstrates the shortcomings of the paradigmatic Neo-Spinozist and Neo-Hegelian modes of thinking socio-political change: minor and un-coordinated de-territorializations do not sufficiently make a new contour in the marble of the world, and Evental ruptures do nothing but erase the old shapes without providing a determinate new form. To make a new form or create the shape of the world one would be at home with, one needs to sculpt concertedly with coordinated purpose until it becomes instantiated as a habit.

The first chapter will comprise a sustained explication of Malabou's new materialism grounded in plasticity. I argue that the critical reception of Catherine Malabou's thought, particularly in the English-speaking world, has been over-determined by the inaccurate impression of her 'signature' concept of plasticity as being strictly localized to neuroplasticity. I will then explicate Malabou's larger philosophical project of elaborating a plasticity of being *qua* being of which neuroplasticity is one expression or manifestation of. This will lead me to assert that what plasticity means is essentially the capacity of Being to

give, receive or annihilate form, which entails, ultimately, our possibility to transform ourselves or be otherwise.

The second chapter will continue from this logical end of Malabou's elaboration of ontological plasticity. I will argue that for Malabou's concept of plasticity to have the emancipatory potential she envisages, plasticity, as purely ontological, requires a material instantiation or means of subjective actualization. Following this, I submit that such a requisite mode of putting plasticity to work is found in the concept of habit which is the 'instrument' through which plasticity is sculpted. Pursuant to this, I will elaborate Malabou's reading of Hegel's account of habit in the *Philosophy of Mind* and supplement it in two ways. First, I will transpose the ontological-individual account of habit in *Philosophy of Mind* to the socio-political role of habit found in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, identifying a missed opportunity on Malabou's part to substantiate her claims to the socio-political import of plasticity and habit. Secondly, I draw out the similarities between Hegel and Heidegger's accounts of social habituation that Malabou fails to detect, ultimately strengthening Malabou's attempted rapprochement between the two figures. In the end, I argue that reading habit through Malabou's thinking of plasticity and her rapprochement between Hegel and Heidegger offers a different and productive perspective on habit as a critical ethico-political modality that can helpfully negotiate some of the binaries or impasses that mark contemporary ongoing debates in the interrelated fields of ontology and political theory.

Chapter 1

1 Plasticity

This chapter argues that the critical reception of Catherine Malabou's thought, particularly in the English-speaking world, has been over-determined by the inaccurate impression of her 'signature' concept of plasticity as being strictly localized to neuroplasticity. The tendency of Malabou's interlocutors in her critical reception to overemphasize this expression of plasticity risks effacing the more crucial philosophical bases of why Malabou *needs* plasticity itself; that is, plasticity here is treated as a beginning point rather than a *result*. It is my contention that the focus on Malabou's engagement with neuroscience effectively obscures the trajectory of her project as one that is committed to elaborating a new materialism of immanence grounded in a general ontology of plasticity, that is, a plasticity of Being *qua* Being. I argue that Malabou develops plasticity in response to the need to render intelligible her vision of a wholly immanent, closed structure of Being without recourse to any transcendent(s), exteriority or outside. I will re-construct, identify and foreground the key elements that subtend the logic of Malabou's philosophical program which make plasticity necessary and, as such, properly situate our understanding of plasticity as pertaining to both more general ontological and socio-political claims contra its strict localization to only neuroplasticity.

Following Malabou's argument for an ontology of plasticity to its logical end, what I argue is that plasticity, in and of itself, is purely an ontological principle that is neither inherently progressive nor normatively positive. Plasticity is without prescription or purpose; it is simply, in the end, the reception, donation or annihilation of form or matter: it is the indifferent stage of the world untethered from the gaze of a Big Other, the design of a God or any *telos* whatsoever. The world, our socio-political organizations and ourselves are merely densely imbricated finite materialities capable of processual composition and recomposition, whose direction, shape and contours are nothing but the product of our own intervention and construction: conscious and unconscious alike. As

such, plasticity is only the ontological argument for the pure *possibility* that defines Being and thus cannot positively direct or guide human activity but rather only provide a metaphysical resource to unsettle any claims to necessity (such as the realism that undergirds contemporary late capitalism). While significant in this epistemic respect, plasticity thus requires a commensurate theory of subjective action through which the knowledge of this ontological possibility of plasticity can become efficacious or actualized. This, I argue, is habit and will be treated in the second chapter of this thesis.

This chapter will then proceed to outline Malabou's core ontological project of elaborating a new materialism of immanence bereft of any transcendent(s), outside or exteriority by re-constructing the development of her theoretical trajectory which unfold in roughly two phases and domains: philosophical and scientific. Malabou's work in *The Future of Hegel* and *The Heidegger Change* constitutes the securement of the strictly ontological basis of her materialism, comprising her philosophical articulation of plasticity staged through a rapprochement of Hegel and Heidegger which leads Malabou to ascertain plasticity as a general ontological principal of being *qua* being. The second major phase in the development of plasticity concerns Malabou's turn to neuroscience where she tracks the expression of ontological plasticity in the work of neuroscience. This again takes form in the course of two separate but arguably conjoined works – *WB* and *NW* - that treat the two respective major valences of plasticity: constructive – the positive side of plasticity in the reception and donation of form – and destructive – the aleatory, indifferent nature of matter's own plastic capacity to autodestruct or deform itself. Having firmly and clearly established the nature of Malabou's ontological plasticity, we will then be in a place to proceed to habit which constitutes the site through which I will elaborate a materialist theory of subjectivity vis-à-vis reading habit as the instrument of human activity which *sculpts* plasticity.

1.1 Catherine Malabou Beyond Neuroplasticity

Being is plasticity: the threefold capacity to receive, give or annihilate form. Such is the sole principle, the great insight and terminus of Malabou's philosophy, one could and may be led to believe. A focus on plasticity marks all secondary engagements with Malabou's works and, it should be said, not without reason – how could one possibly escape it? It is there in the beginning in her doctoral dissertation as ontological plasticity *The Future of Hegel* (1996/2005), in her engagements with the constructive plasticity in *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (2005/2009), through her work on destructive plasticity in *The New Wounded* (2008/2012), in her intervention into feminist theory with gender plasticity in *Changing Difference* (2009/2012) and also in her most recent co-publication with Adrian Johnston, *Self and Emotional Life* (2013). The ubiquity of plasticity in Malabou's oeuvre has led some, such as Alexander Galloway², to disapprovingly characterize plasticity as an “intellectual mannerism...to return again and again to plasticity as [a] universal explanation” (Galloway, “Catherine Malabou, or The Commerce of Being” 3), a simple catch-all *deus ex machina*, which, for Galloway,

² Galloway conducted a series of public lectures at the Public School in New York in 2010 which were published in a pamphlet under the title *French Theory Today*. In this lecture series, Galloway treats Malabou, Bernard Stiegler, Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, Quentin Meillassoux and Francois Laruelle, of whom he has selected as representative of new work occurring in French continental theory. His lecture on Malabou, of which I will respond to both here and briefly later in this chapter, comprises one of the only engagements by a semi-visible/notable American intellectual with her work, and as such, represents a disservice to Malabou's thinking and to those exposed to her work for the first time through his explication. Galloway is derisive, snide and superficial in his treatment and reading of Malabou, demonstrating a total lack of any sophisticated study, attention or time paid to her work – it is an empty and hollow gesture that he even openly ‘considers’ her work. While the engagements with the other thinkers in the pamphlet series are primarily thoughtful, considerate and affirmative, Galloway's engagement with Malabou should not even be called as such, being a collegiate, mud-slinging affair motivated by a barely covert Deleuzian partisanship that distorts his readings – which are in themselves violent and careless – closing off Malabou's thinking in advance. This constitutes precisely an instance of violence in where Malabou is put under erasure because Galloway, showing his “true colours”, admits that he wonders “if there can ever be an appealing political project founded on the work of Hegel or Derrida” (13), never stopping to think or take the time to read, or entertain the possibility that she – Catherine Malabou – may not be isomorphic with them. One might think, may hope, that the name on the book cover – Catherine Malabou – may signal emphatically enough that she is not.

paradoxically ossifies plasticity, a principle of change, into a static, fixed universal: "...it [is] an irony that fuels [Malabou]: that to promote plasticity as a big, overarching concept – much like the role that Spirit plays in Hegel – is to contradict the meaning of plasticity as change..." (Galloway 8)³. Malabou's plasticity, then, is a "voracious monster that can gobble up all foes into itself" (Galloway 15), that extols perpetual change as an 'ethical' end in itself (Galloway 13, 15), that resembles Hegel's dialectic, and reflects the ruthless consumptive apparatus that is "neoliberal capitalism" (Galloway 15). The charges are then pretty thickly laid: ideologue of contemporary capitalism, old wine in a new bottle, the valorization of polymorphic becoming as an inherent good in itself. Her coup, her unmooring, her sole contribution: plasticity⁴; we are given yet another black night into which all cows disappear. Such is Malabou, dissipating unceremoniously in the voracity of her own conceptual creation⁵.

³ This critique is vapid and is premised on a fundamental misunderstanding of Malabou's articulation of plasticity. This ostensible objection is akin to posing to Charles Darwin: is it not true that, in asserting evolution as a universal principle of life, you may be stultifying the very idea you yourself propound? Does evolution not itself evolve? It is a puerile and intellectually empty approach fueled, it seems, by a small dose of *jouissance* attained through discerning a superficial contradiction that really, upon the slightest examination, has no bearing on anything.

⁴ "...one wonders if Malabou's commerce of being is not too intimately related to the mode of production. In other words, is a theory of plasticity necessarily also a theory of today's economy?" (Galloway 14-5). The arguments levied here against Malabou from Galloway are *exactly* the same familiar critiques that have been deployed against Galloway's prioritized thinker, Deleuze, since the co-publication of *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* with Felix Guatarri. To simply regurgitate with a mirror – in a sophomoric game of 'no you are' – leaves one feeling that Galloway is almost comically self-unaware or that he may, for some reason, be inciting readers. Either way, it both reflects poorly on him and fails to contribute to the efficacy of his argument.

⁵ Galloway's concerns here seem representative of what seem to be some of the main problems voiced in response to Malabou, gleaned from both published formal mediums and seminars and academic exchanges (on which one must presently rely given the relative paucity of extensive work on her). She is viewed, because of the ubiquity of plasticity in her work, a kind of 'one-trick pony' peddling a concept which, because of its very plasticity, becomes conceptually *meaningless*. Yet, I contend that by focusing too much on plasticity, these accounts miss the philosophical reasons that Malabou develops plasticity. The other distinct strand of criticism directed towards Malabou comes from her treatment of neuroscience. See Hannah Proctor's "Neuronal Ideologies" or Florence Chiew's "Neuroplasticity as an Ecology of Mind" for criticisms of Malabou in this regard. For a psychoanalytically grounded criticism of Malabou's *The New Wounded*, see Slavoj Žižek *Living in the End Times* 291-314. To vindicate the claim that Galloway's publication may have detrimentally influenced Malabou's reception, see especially Proctor's essay in which she relies on Galloway's exegesis, advancing her case against Malabou vis-à-vis a, essentially reiterative, deployment of Galloway's arguments: "...Malabou...approaches the brain already armed with her own theory of plasticity, which, though characterized by mutability, is paradoxically unchanging, universal" (Proctor 1); "...if Malabou's plastic explosions are always local rather than global, individual

The reception of Malabou's thinking has, however, not all been solely negative; quite the contrary. Evaluations of Malabou's thinking have been complimentary, especially in regards to her willingness to cross traditionally rigid disciplinary boundaries – writ large, the sciences and the humanities – in order to engage different modes of knowledge into constructive dialogue with one another⁶. Reception of Malabou's first work *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, Dialectic* (1996/2004) is largely adulatory; recognized as one of the more significant publications on Hegel in recent scholarship, it holds a central place within a growing corpus – including work of Judith Butler, Frederic Jameson, Adrian Johnston, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Slavoj Žižek – of ongoing contemporary re-appraisals, defenses and creative or plastic readings of Hegelian thought⁷. However, beyond this initial publication, engagement with and critical elaboration of Malabou's work is decidedly narrow. Her next significant work, *The Heidegger Change: On the*

rather than collective, surely this conforms precisely to the very image of contemporary capitalism she is seeking to undermine” (Proctor 5); “[a]s Galloway notes, despite her insistence to the contrary, Malabou's understanding of plasticity is itself an ideology of the mode of production, which, with its emphasis on 'absolute exchangeability', echoes Marx's attacks on capitalism—and, like capitalism, has no outside.” (Proctor 5)

⁶ In staging a visible dialogue between these two modes of thought, Malabou is pushing both the humanities and sciences towards their own ‘unthought’, forcing them to confront one another, showing that they have much to give to one another in terms of support, fraternity and supplementation. In a recent piece for *Transeuropeennes*, Malabou delivered an address entitled “The Future of the Humanities”. In it she states precisely that the “frontiers between the Humanities and the Sciences must be redrawn” (1). In this sense, Malabou operates in the space opened up by the project of deconstruction: she is (one of) the future(s) envisaged by both Foucault in the *Order of Things* – the production of a counter-science which forces disciplines to speak back and mutually supplement each other – as well as the force of resistance called for by Derrida in the “University without Condition”; an avatar of both the future and emerging new Humanities.

⁷ Žižek is particularly effusive, writing that Malabou's *The Future of Hegel* is: “...one of the books on Hegel that, in an almost regular rhythm of every decade or two, mysteriously surface in France, books which are epochal in the strictest meaning of the word: they redefine the entire field into which they intervene...One cannot but fully agree with Derrida when he wrote that ‘nothing will ever absolve us from following step by step, page by page, the extraordinary trajectory of *The Future of Hegel*...I once again urge all to read this book’” (Žižek, *Less Than Nothing* 17)

Fantastic in Philosophy (2004/2010), has received, to date, little to no attention⁸. *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction* (2005/2010), a metaphilosophical conceptual portrait and intellectual autobiography (Malabou 1, 65, 81), has been the subject of numerous reviews but, essentially, only that⁹; it is treated as an introduction, a theoretical roadmap that Malabou draws herself for her readers to follow her in her peripatetic explorations of the dialectic, destruction, deconstruction, Hegel, Heidegger and Derrida. *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage* (2008/2012), has fared a little better in terms of visibility, but the reviews of Malabou's confrontation of neuroscience and psychoanalysis are mostly cool, if not critical¹⁰. Her work *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy* (2009/2011) has, unfortunately, suffered the same fate as her text on Heidegger, being treated in only

⁸ There has been little engagement – if any at all – with Malabou's work *The Heidegger Change: The Fantastic in Philosophy* (2004/2010). Ian James's *The New French Philosophy* discusses Malabou's oeuvre as a whole, glossing some of the main arguments and moves that Malabou makes in her idiosyncratic reading of Heidegger. Other than James's survey of contemporary French thought (again, like Galloway, placing Malabou in the company of figures like Alain Badiou, Francois Laruelle, Jacques Ranciere, Jean-Luc Nancy, Bernard Stiegler), there has been one review published (Avello Publishing Journal Vol. 1, No. 1. 2011 Editor: Jason Wakefield) and little else but cursory acknowledgement of Malabou's work on Heidegger in overviews or introductions of her philosophy. As one of the main texts that comprise the bedrock of her theoretical project, the lack of engagement with *The Heidegger Change* is both curious and unfortunate. While *The Future of Hegel* (1996) is a revised version of Malabou's doctoral work, *The Heidegger Change*, published in French in 2004, represents one of Malabou's first mature works. It is arguably the most important text in her oeuvre to understand how she comes to posit the absolute priority of metamorphosis, change or transformation over any other ontological principle (namely that of *différance* – against Derrida – and difference – against Deleuze). Familiarity with this text enriches considerably one's understanding and feel for Malabou's philosophical project.

⁹ Some selected examples: Bhandar, Brenna and Goldberg-Hiller Johnathan. Rev. *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, Catherine Malabou. *Theory and Event*, 14.1 (2011). Online; Protevi, John. Rev. *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, Catherine Malabou. *Notre Dame Philosophical Review*, Feb. 22 (2010). Online; Lloyd, Chris. Rev. *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, Catherine Malabou. *Derrida Today*, 6, Nov. (2013). Online.

¹⁰ See Slavoj Žižek's *Living in the End Times* 291-314, Hannah Proctor's "Neuronal Ideologies", Rada Faadek's "Catherine Malabou's *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*" for criticisms of this work. See Bryan Smyth's review of *The New Wounded* in the *Notre Dame Philosophical Review* and José Luis Romanillos's "Catherine Malabou's *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*" for positive appraisals of the text.

less than a handful of reviews¹¹. The same holds true for both her essay *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity* (2009/2012) as well as her recent co-publication with Adrian Johnston, *Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Neuroscience* (2013).

It is Malabou's *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (2005/2008) that has garnered the most attention and which has assumed priority in the critical reception of her work, acting as the touchstone or aperture through which Malabou's philosophy is either referenced, entered or read through. This is not entirely surprising given the novelty of its subject matter – a Hegelian reading of the neuroscientific ontogenesis of the subject and its relation with the spirit of capitalism – and the overtly political tenor of the book, which is signaled immediately in its opening line, a paraphrase of Karl Marx's famous line in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*: "The brain is a work, and we do not know it. We are its subjects – authors and products at once – and we do not know it" (Malabou, *WB* 1). The text comprises a call to a new consciousness of the historicity of the brain – and thus of ourselves – and a solicitation, a challenge to seriously countenance our radical possibility and push back against a world that everywhere seeks to occlude our primordial capacity for, in Malabou's critical vocabulary, not merely *flexibility* (*WB* 12), the ability to only docilely *con-form*, but rather for *plasticity*: the ability to resist and reform, to create and constitute not just be constituted. Teeming with emancipatory valences concerning the 'constructive' and 'recuperative' nature of plasticity and the open-ended, processual (and dialectical)¹² constitution of the brain, the work has drawn, understandably, most of the

¹¹ Stone, Alison. "Book Review: Catherine Malabou's *Changing Difference*". Rev. of *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy*, Catherine Malabou. *The London School of Economics and Political Science Review of Books*. May 15th (2012). Online; Kizuk, Sarah. "Changing Difference, Reviewed by Sarah Kizuk". Rev. of *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy*, Catherine Malabou. *Society and Space Open Site*. Online.

¹² I place dialectical here in brackets because there are a number of articles cropping up in where Malabou is taken up – or obliquely referenced – in conversation with theoretical orientations indebted to Deleuze and it should be remembered that there may be irreconcilable barriers between Malabou and anything broadly Deleuzian given Malabou's staunch commitment to both contradiction and dialectics. Here I refer to, specifically, for instance, JD Dewsbury's "The Deleuzo-Guattarian Assemblage: Plastic Habits", Andrew Lapworth's "Habit, art, and the plasticity of the subject: the ontogenetic shock of the bioart encounter" and Elizabeth Grosz's "Habit Today: Ravaissou, Bergson, Deleuze". For instance, Dewsbury writes: "...the agenda proposed is exemplified through understanding the assemblage concept through the

critical attention and, perhaps, rightly so. It is the most explicitly political text of Malabou's, where the stakes of her project for our contemporary moment are most clearly put in relief, as well as being the most outwardly novel in its idiosyncratic attempt to synthesize philosophy and neurobiology in order to fashion a new mode of agential materialist subjectivity through a politicization of the brain. It is also the most *hopeful* and empowering in the sense of Baruch Spinoza, stylistically employing the tenor and rhetorical gestures of a concerted manifesto: it is a call to arms, in where reading it you feel your power of activity increase, a joyful surge within you, and your sad passions slightly diminish.

However, the focus granted to *WB* in appraisals of Malabou's thought has led to a number of inadvertencies that somewhat distort the sum picture of and potentially obscure the breadth and nuance as well as intelligibility and originality of Malabou's unfolding project. The emphasis placed on Malabou's engagements with neuroplasticity and individual self-shaping unduly circumscribe the scope and gravity of Malabou's thought by inadequately situating it within her larger ontological project of a plasticity of being *qua* being of which neuroscience is one expression. Interpretations that frame Malabou's philosophical interventions as being limited to neuro-plastic *self*-shaping also creates the undue impression that she is concerned primarily or only with the individual and individual transformation, thereby obfuscating the broader socio-political, collective and geopolitical registers to which her work richly speaks. Malabou's discussion of the plasticity of the brain does not merely pertain to the individual subject or subjects¹³ – our

work of Catherine Malabou on that of plasticity and habit, clear extensions in the 21st century of Deleuze and Guattari's earlier ideas" (148). However, this is anything *but* clear. These pieces make use of Malabou's conceptual work in conjunction with vitalist and Deleuzian indebted projects baldly eliding or even surreptitiously erasing important distinctions to made between Malabou's own project – premised fundamentally on a firm belief in negativity – and something that is broadly vitalist in tenor – which admits no negativity whatsoever.

¹³ If rendered or construed as such and read strictly at the level of the personal, Malabou's thought is quite easily conflated with a broad trajectory of post-Foucauldian discourse concerning the care or art of the self – the ethics of self-shaping, self-making, self-sculpturing – or, worse, made indistinguishable from a liberalist atomism in where we can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps and rationally change by our

personal capacity to change nor only to neuroscience itself – but more generally implicates the plasticity of being itself in all of its social, political and planetary organizations and forms. Indeed, what seems neglected as well in critical engagements with and appraisals of Malabou's *WB* – as well with discussions of *NW* – is Malabou's insistence on the social, collective and geopolitical registers of her investigations into the plasticity of the brain. While only inchoately sketched out, the conclusions of both Malabou's books on the brain and plasticity – the constructive plasticity of *WB* and the destructive plasticity of *NW* – each end with suggestive invocations of the social, political and planetary pertinence of her thinking. In *WB*, it is the call for a new 'biological alter-globalism' (78), a plastic community to come, and throughout *NW*, it is the suggestion to grasp the similarities between psychic trauma and socio-political, global (213), and I argue, even planetary trauma. As Malabou states in a lecture entitled "From Sorrow to Indifference: Current Politics and the Emotional Brain":

The objective neurological impact of trauma makes it possible to sketch a new world wide typology of psychic illness that pertaining neither to neuroses or psychoses allows the disaffected faces of the victims to appear at the border between nature and community. As we look at these faces, it is impossible to forget what unites them and effaces the distinction between lesional trauma, socio-political trauma and trauma caused by natural cataclysms. The difference among the sources of such wounds can tend to, in fact, become blurred on the level of their effects (Malabou)

own will (I thank Michael Gardiner for posing this problem to me). If this were truly the case, one could ask: what is new about what Malabou and what is the point of her book? As Andrew Goffey suggests in his negative review of her work, Malabou's contribution seems a little "fruitless" beyond pointing out some tensions in neuroscientific research from a 'Hegelian' perspective (51). While this is certainly an element of her thought, this characterization of Malabou potentially reduces her to being a mere proponent of an atomistic micropolitics from which she must be carefully distinguished (the reasons of which are glossed in the above footnote). The speculative proposition implicit in Malabou's work is that, not only do individual subjects operate according to an open ended dialectical plasticity, but that it is society, political structures and even the earth itself – all of being – that functions according to the same metamorphic ontology of sculpturing. It is not only the self that is a finite materiality to be sculpted, but the social, political and planetary as well.

Thus, we have open invitations to speculatively transpose Malabou's discussion of the local neuronal operations of plasticity into significantly wider macro registers¹⁴.

The priority of *WB* in the critical reception of Malabou thus, whether it is negatively or positive appraised, and, inadvertently or not, risks rendering her contributions as a thinker coterminous with this line of inquiry, depicting her as a thinker who is concerned *strictly* with neuroplasticity or a rapprochement between the humanities and sciences. While these are certainly worthwhile pursuits in their own right, and are central features of Malabou's itinerary, representing Malabou only as such effectively deracinates her investigations into neuroplasticity from her larger philosophical project of elaborating a materialist ontology of plasticity qua *being* itself of which, again, neuroplasticity is a striking expression thereof. This overdetermination of Malabou risks effacing the arguably more important issue: the philosophical bases and reasons of why Malabou *needs* or conceptually develops plasticity in the first place. What must be remembered is that plasticity is not a beginning point but rather a *result*, developed or created in response to a philosophical problem for which there was not an adequate solution; otherwise, evidently, the deployment of plasticity would itself be a *superfluity*, with no reason for existence or circulation. To understand the importance of plasticity clearly, one must identify precisely the parameters and impetus of her philosophical project so as to ascertain why it is that Malabou *needs* plasticity. That is, the more fundamental question should be: what is Malabou attempting to think that necessitates the development and deployment of plasticity and, secondly, what kind of ontological vision does plasticity enable us to intelligibly think? Despite insisting on this approach to Malabou's work, I am expressly *not* disavowing or attempting to marginalize plasticity – which would be unfeasible given its centrality to her oeuvre – but arguing rather that an understanding of plasticity is significantly enriched by performing the necessary work of situating it within

¹⁴ As Malabou states: "Between the system of absolute knowledge or of absolute subjectivity in Hegel and the nervous system in neurobiology, the difference is not so dramatic. It is the same mode of being, the same functioning, the same economy...I am insisting upon the community between different kinds of systematic plastic organizations" ("Conversation with Catherine Malabou" 6).

Malabou's larger theoretical project, a task, after which having been completed, will make plasticity's conceptual force and import fully intelligible.

1.2 Malabou's New Materialism: Against Transcendent(s)

I continue to defend the thesis that the only valid philosophical path today lies in the elaboration of a new materialism...a materialism, as the basis for *a new philosophy of spirit*... - Malabou, *NW* 212-3

To state that nothing is unconvertible amounts to claiming the philosophical necessity of the thought of a new materialism, which does not believe in the "formless" and implies the vision of a malleable real... - Malabou, *PDW* 77

What, then, is Malabou's ontological vision and why does she need plasticity to render it intelligible? As gleaned from the quotes above, Malabou self-avowedly pursues a new materialism, the core tenet of which can be succinctly expressed as the coherent elaboration of a purely immanentist materialism bereft of any semblance of extraresidual exteriority, outside or transcendent(s). Indeed, the insistent subterranean mantra of all Malabou's work is a refutation of all vestiges of an alterity, an other, a trace that would affect to escape or be able to flee the frontiers of Being (*PDW* 40, 71). It is *this*, the cold, sober and complete affirmation of the absolute immanence of material being and the utter negation of any palliative 'elsewhere', that animates and defines the core ontological claim at the center of Malabou's thought: "We cannot leave Being. Being is that which is impossible to escape..." (*PDW* 43). Material being, for Malabou, can thus be described as a closed totality, an unsurpassable One-All which she variously renders, interchangeably throughout her writing, as a totally immanent *structure*, *system* or *economy*¹⁵: "as a Hegelian, I am quite convinced that...we are living in a closed

¹⁵ It is here that Malabou's difference from the other Neo-Hegelian materialists (Badiou, Žižek, Johnston) is most clearly marked. Whereas they posit an ontological Non-All vis-à-vis the assertion of the barred

organizational *structure*...” (“CWM” 10; emphasis mine); “Being schematizes itself and...cannot be explained by anything external to the *System*” (*FH* 17; emphasis mine); “...ontology is an economy. There is nothing beyond it...” (*PDW* 44; emphasis mine). Being is a structure, a system, an economy of the schematization of matter into which, as existing, we take form and are irrevocably thrown into without reprieve, hope or solace construed in any traditional philosophical sense of there being the possibility of an inviolable ‘beyond’ – like the other, the trace, the outside – upon which to draw that would resist, disrupt or exceed *materialization*: there is “...no irruptive transcendence, there is no open door to the pure event. Nor any messianism” (Malabou, *PDW* 44); “Today I have serious reservations about such a ‘beyond’. All in all, I have never really believed in an alterity of pure dissymmetry. Perhaps it comes from some sort of dialectical stubbornness, but I can believe only in the concept of an articulated alterity, attached to that of which it is the alterity...” (Malabou, *PDW* 41); “I don’t believe in transcendence at all. I don’t believe in something like the absolute Other, or in any kind of transcendence or openness to the other” (Malabou, “CWM” 10). There is Being, that is, matter, and that is all¹⁶.

For the purposes of elaborating a veritable materialism, rigorously averring this purely immanent encompassing system that strictly prohibits the appeal to a transcendent outside is crucial to Malabou because, according to her, previous attempts to disrupt metaphysical thought by mobilizing an idea of an inviolable, non-incorporable excess – her privileged examples are Emmanuel Levinas’s ‘Other’ and Derrida’s the ‘trace’ (*PDW* 76-8, “The Living Room: Hospitality and Plasticity” 3-6), but another implicit target

subject by reading Hegel through Lacan, Malabou instead reads Hegel through Heidegger and Derrida, arguing for a total One-All ontological structure.

¹⁶ Malabou thus firmly invalidates the clandestine intrusion of a Kantianism into her thought that she sees afflicting the work of her mentor, Jacques Derrida, and the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, who both affirm the existence of an excess of the other or the trace which is undeconstructible, unknowable or undialectizable. See *PDW*’s “Afterword” 65-83.

could be Gilles Deleuze's difference and any other 'aneconomic' logics – essentially *reproduce* the logic of metaphysics and, also, of capitalism, by fetishistically asserting the existence of something which is unconvertible or unchangeable (*PDW* 76-8, *HC* 276). Counterintuitively, Malabou argues that it is not absolute presence or exchangeability that defines metaphysical and capitalistic thinking, but rather the way in which both obscure or conceal the contingent grounds of their emergence, that is, that they are, in fact, both exchangeable, capable of transformation, substitution or replacement by other forms themselves: "...capitalism and metaphysics connect together and buttress each other by constituting...a logic of exchange that *occludes the meaning of originary exchangeability*" (Malabou, *HC* 276; emphasis mine). That is, what is definitive about both metaphysics and capitalism (or any ideological formation for that matter) is that they seek to conceal the fact that, at one time, they *came into presence*, that they were originally (ex)changed and, thus, can be changed again. Thus, for Malabou:

To affirm the existence of something that remains inconvertible, whatever this may be, is to affirm that this very something does not enter into the game of substitution, remaining outside of the circle, holding itself separate from the economy... if the trace is considered to be absolutely inconvertible, utterly resistant to the play of exchanges, to circulation, to the economy of presence, then it becomes substantial. It is no longer a trace, but a substance (Malabou, "The Living Room: Hospitality and Plasticity" 4)

This process of substantialization thus coincides with, Malabou argues, the logic of the fetish as described by Marx: "[t]he assertion of inconvertibility lies, for Marx, at the heart of fetishism. On the face of it, the fetish always occurs outside the operation of exchange, outside the market...stating that the trace is inconvertible...it acquires the status of a substance or fetish" (*PDW* 76-7). The insistence upon a radical alterity, exteriority or otherness that escapes the operation of exchange, Malabou shows, is to actually reinscribe the metaphysical-capitalist logic one is purportedly undermining in the positing of an ostensibly 'disruptive' exteriority or inconvertible. This operation is, in fact, structurally homologous with metaphysics and capitalism which represent themselves as inconvertible, purely beyond exchange; it is exactly their own exchangeability and

convertibility that they wish to obfuscate: everything can be (ex)changed with the exception of themselves. This is why criticisms levied against Malabou's assertion of 'absolute exchangeability' as coinciding with the logic of capitalism, such as those proffered by Alexander Galloway and Hannah Proctor, wholly miss the mark. Proctor writes: "...despite her insistence to the contrary, Malabou's understanding of plasticity is itself an ideology of the mode of production, which, with its emphasis on 'absolute exchangeability', echoes Marx's attacks on capitalism—and, like capitalism, has no outside" (Proctor 5). Galloway expands further and more sharply:

...one wonders if Malabou's commerce of being is not too intimately related to the mode of production. In other words, is a theory of plasticity necessarily also a theory of today's economy? Malabou's plasticity is a voracious monster that can gobble up any and all foes into itself. Of course, one says the same of Hegel's dialectic, but one also says the same of neoliberal capitalism. So when Malabou says that "absolute exchangeability is the structure" and feels no sense of nausea in uttering such claim, one cannot help but recall the strains of intense scorn lurking on the pages of Marx's *Capital* when such a description of the world first found its voice...Or consider when Malabou observes – *uncritically mind you* – that "in Heidegger's philosophy metaphysics and capitalism coincide"...One wonders how this could not be the ideology of capitalism returning again, only this time all the more cynical as it comes from the mouth of its putative critic. (15; emphasis mine)

There are many things that could be said here – especially with regards to the rather hostile tone and language – however, the most egregious and bald inaccuracy concerns Galloway's imputation of Malabou's 'uncritically' minded alignment of metaphysics and capitalism. As elaborated above, Malabou's contention that metaphysics and capitalism coincide, while provocative, is anything but uncritical: it is rather *explicitly* so in a sophisticated and dialectically elegant fashion. The reproach that a theorist's thinking maps on to or directly reflects the mode of production is both easy and lazy, sensationalized conjecture parading as profundity. Here it almost broaches the limit of credulity in respect to Galloway and Proctor as they so transparently fail to understand

Malabou's explicitly critical, nuanced and insightful argument – or, more generously, simply fail to consult the text, which so patently contradicts the charges of 'ideological complicity' laid against Malabou.

A second related argument that Galloway and Proctor both proffer against Malabou, regarding the seemingly static, universal and fixed status of plasticity, is admittedly more feasible, as it is an immanently grounded critique that potentially might locate a contradiction within Malabou's own thinking (instead of externally imposing it upon her through a textually unsupportable analogical comparison with the mode of production). Proctor comments that: "Malabou...approaches the brain already armed with her own theory of plasticity, which, though characterized by mutability, is *paradoxically unchanging, universal*" (1; emphasis mine). Galloway similarly argues: "...the irony is clear: the plastic as the universal. The thing most associated with change is the thing that does not change...[m]ight it be possible then that plasticity itself has to change? (Malabou does this kind of trick quite often)" (3). Ignoring the derisive rhetoric again, the point being made is apropos: if Malabou's thought seeks to eviscerate any substantial, transcendent principle, does her own concept of plasticity not match this exact criteria? That is, does Malabou not, in her own way, contravene her own critique of the inconvertible by fetishizing and substantivizing plasticity? While the ubiquity and plastic explanatory power of plasticity itself is a possible weakness Malabou must address, consistent with her own theory of absolute exchangeability, Malabou openly concedes – a number of times – that plasticity itself will, and, must, one day, change. As if precisely anticipating such objections, Malabou writes in *CD*: "plasticity is not, I repeat, an empty, transcendental instance. Plasticity is nothing outside of its context and supplementarity status...plasticity will only last the time of its forms" (65-66). Adducing Derrida's similar confession in *Margins of Philosophy* that "the efficacy of *differáncé* may very well, indeed must, one day be superseded..." (7), Malabou repeats Derrida's gesture, acknowledging that "the plastic replacement will one day be sublated" (66). Again in *PDW* Malabou emphasizes the historicity of plasticity, contending that "it is able to *momentarily* characterize the material organization of thought and being" (61). Contrary to the objections made by Galloway and Proctor, Malabou repeatedly foregrounds the *momentary* nature of plasticity throughout her work, arguing not that she has disinterred

or divined *the* eternal ontological principle, but one that, as she says, seems to able to characterize the material organization of thought and being at our present historical juncture, providing a ‘motor scheme’ through which the present can be made intelligible¹⁷. Malabou is thus entirely consistent with her own thinking, submitting plasticity itself – like everything else – to the prospect of transformation.

Against the traditional tendency to strategically mobilize an inconvertible transcendent as an indigestible or non-incorporable point of resistance against dominant forms of thought, such as metaphysics and capitalism, Malabou thus contends that a more effective theoretical gesture is to admit that everything is wholly immanent, transformable, contingent thus *including* metaphysics and capitalism themselves in this economy of ontological (ex)change. The essential problem with the fundamentally Kantian dualistic ontological schema operative in the idea of an ‘outside’ is that it asserts a thing-in-itself inaccessible to human understanding and intervention, that which, nevertheless, still exerts influence over and purchase on human life. The danger here is that the positing of a non-incorporable exteriority provides a purely empty, formal structure that is amenable or hospitable to any given content: the ‘thing-in-itself’ could be justice or democracy (as in Derrida), the other or the face (as in Levinas), matter or nature (as in the New Materialisms of Jane Bennett and William Connolly); or it could very well just as be capitalism and the ‘free’ market – its pure formality permits any and every ‘truth’ while perniciously providing no critical recourse to those subjected to it because of the implicit authority generated by its constitutive inaccessibility and unknowability. The attendant

¹⁷ “All thought needs a scheme, that is, a motif [writing or *différance* in Derrida, time in Heidegger, plasticity in Hegel and Malabou], produced by the rational imagination, enabling it to force open the door to an epoch and open up exegetical perspectives suited to it. To think is always to schematize, to go from the concept to existence by bringing a transformed concept into existence...A motor scheme, the pure image of thought – plasticity, time, writing – is a type of tool capable of generating the greatest quantity of energy and information in the text of an epoch. It gathers and develops the meanings and tendencies that impregnate the culture at a given moment as *floating images*, which, constitute, both vaguely and definitely, a material “atmosphere” or *Stimmung* (“humor, “affective tonality”). A motor scheme is what Hegel calls the characteristic (*Eigentümlichkeit*) of an epoch, its style or individual brand. As a general design if you wish...For example...it is clear that the enlargement of the concept of writing [in Derrida], the passage of its narrow meaning to its modified meaning, was authorized by the initially undefined cultural suggestivity of the “model-images” of inscription, code, or program, which activated this culture” (PDW 13-4).

corollary of this is then a twofold subjection: subjection to the regime of the governing ‘thing-in-itself’ and, implicitly, a consequent subjection to a similarly unknowable ‘thing-in-itself’ that would disrupt and change that reigning status quo. That is, if the situation in which you exist achieves the status of a naturalized, ontological necessity beyond human intervention or accessibility, the only logical recourse of the subjected is to hope for the arrival of an equally unknowable and inaccessible event that would challenge and dislodge the present ‘thing-in-itself’. This ontological schema thus logically and structurally encourages a kind of messianism which, for Malabou, divests subjects of agency, cultivating a resigned passivity in where one lives with the feeling that there is nothing one can do. To decisively eliminate this empty, formal transcendent placeholder is to foreclose its mobilization and expropriate a fundamental ontological resource that both subtends the ideological naturalizing operations of metaphysics and capitalism and inculcates docile and passive subjective positions. By submitting *everything* to the economy of absolute exchangeability, systems or forms of organization are exposed in their proper denaturalized contingency, making claims to necessity or inevitability – such as those made by metaphysics and capitalism – vulnerable and open to contestation. This ontological move is both monstrous and momentous in equal measures: it is the opening up of pure possibility, but with possibility comes exposure and vulnerability that accompany existence in a lawless Real that harbors no guarantees; we are both freed by and subject to its contingencies. Malabou characterizes this unfolding situation as one of a “contradictory couple of *saturation* and *vacancy*”:

Saturation to the extent that the future can, in our time, no longer represent the promise of far-off worlds to conquer. The philosophical tradition, reaching its completion, has as its double the exhaustion of the outside world. The ‘new world order’ means the impossibility of any exotic, isolated, or geopolitically marginal event. Paradoxically, this saturation of theoretical and natural space is felt as a vacuum. The major problem of our time is the arrival of *free time*. Technological simplification, the shortening of distances...bring about a state in which we must acknowledge that there is nothing more to do. The most sterile aspect of the future lies in unemployment, both economic and metaphysical, which it promises. But this promise is also a promise of novelty, a promise that there are forms of life which must be invented (*FH* 192).

This arrival of absolute saturation and its speculative double of complete vacancy, as Malabou writes, is the emergence of truly metaphysical *free time*: time untethered from an ‘ought’, from a ‘supposed’ to be, opened up in the wake of the death of God and the Big Other; there is no longer a transcendent ‘suppose to be’ or ‘ought’. This free time means “that we can sometimes decide about the future...which means that there is something actually *to do with it*” (PDW 77; emphasis mine). To say, then, that there is no aneconomic point, no formal place beyond structure or system, is to decisively shift the ontological ground: everything that *is* has come into being, has originally (ex)changed, and thus can change again. Yet, the corollary of this is that responsibility for this change lands squarely upon us for its invention. To anticipate, then, questions that will be explored later: are we adequate to the possibilities of this free time? Can we resist the *economic* colonization of this opening up of our metaphysical free time?

1.3 ‘The Systemic Law of the Deconstructed Real’: Plasticity as the Sublation of Material Being

The crucial problem that attends Malabou’s ontological vision of a wholly immanent, monistic real is, however, precisely the issue of change: how does one sufficiently account for, in an absolute system or closed structure, the possibility of change, transformation or difference? If the philosophical bases of Malabou’s project is the commitment to coherently elaborating a pure materialism of complete immanence, this is to consequently affirm that there is *only* material being and hence only presence and only form; whatever is must be material and thus, must be present, must take *form*¹⁸. The

¹⁸ Malabou’s emphasis on form aligns her with a near contemporary in Alain Badiou whose project is motivated by similar problematics: how do we think the emergence of the new with the framework of a materialist, ontological formalism? Each thinker makes the structurally homologous theoretical gesture of re-writing form as constitutively and internally split or incomplete, that is, sublating or immanentizing transcendence within form, matter and structure itself. Another prospective avenue for future research

traditional quandaries associated with such a philosophical position are well-known, having been the subject of contestation, derision and deconstruction throughout the 20th century. If one asserts such a sheer materialism, one runs the risk of being cornered into interrelated problems of causal mechanism, determinism and reductionism: form and matter, traditionally understood in its decisively influential Cartesian and Newtonian inflections, are dumb, inert and passive. Matter is moved, but never moves, (pre)determined but never determining, always requiring something else beyond it, transcendent to it, to activate and shape it. It has a fate but not a future; form is rendered equivalent to presence, static, constrictive, subduing and subordinating difference, squelching the singular. The same negative fate befalls notions of system and structure: intrinsically rigid, totalizing, monological, violent; incapable of the new, of any kind of surprise, bereft of a genuine future. In articulating a post-deconstructive, new materialist philosophy, then, predicated on notions such as a form, matter and system, the problem facing the thinker pursuing such a project is the task of conceptualizing an ontological principle or framework that would satisfactorily respond to these problems. For Malabou, what makes such an ontological vision tenable and ultimately intelligible is her discovery and subsequent elaboration of *plasticity*.

What, then, is *plasticity*? Again, against claimants who arraign Malabou's deployment of plasticity as a fixed, ready-made, ossified principle, one must insist on tracing and reconstructing the migration of plasticity, the manner in which plasticity itself has changed, has transformed and taken shape throughout Malabou's work, how it has slowly enlarged its parameters and scope with, and even within, each theoretical work (from *FH* to *HC* to *WB* to *NW* and *OA*). In a particular sense, Malabou's own development of the concept of plasticity, and, arguably, the sum total of work, exhibits the very logic of plasticity she wishes to articulate: how form, matter or a concept changes shape by both abruption and acclimation, both stretching and pulled beyond itself without definitively

concerns precisely the relationship between the two figures of Malabou and Badiou, being perhaps the two most structurally oriented figures of the new, broadly construed, Neo-Hegelian materialist camp.

breaking, becoming different while still retaining those birthmarks of identity; how form welcomes or withstands with a stoic resiliency, encountering accidents that come to constitute the essential. Echoing Derrida¹⁹, these are precisely the words in which Malabou describes the arrival of plasticity in her thinking, as an imposition, an *accident*:

Everything began, or began again, when, ‘falling’ one day onto the term ‘plastic’, I was brought to a stop, at once intrigued and grateful. Intrigued by its discreet presence in the Hegelian corpus, by that whole realm of the unknowns which gestured through it. Grateful for something essential which was suddenly recognizable. Attempting to understand it more carefully, I started to study the way it functioned in the Hegelian text, focusing my attention onto everything in it which referred back to dynamism of the reception and donation of form, hence to subjectivity itself in a process of self-determination. It was an ‘accident’ – the term ‘plastic’ could at first sight be considered something accidental in Hegel’s text – that brought me to the essential...To me it seems rather that plasticity was imposed on me...” (FH 185-6)

Thus, in Malabou’s project we have a kind of metademonstration of the operation and capacities of plasticity: a happenstance, an accident that definitively changes the migratory course of the form of a thinker’s path, coming to constitute the essential of Malabou’s thought itself and through Malabou’s own transformation, there is a correlative transformation of the received, habitual form or image of Hegel himself; a mutually reciprocal giving of form (to Hegel) and a corollary receiving of form (the transformation of Malabou herself through her engagement with Hegel).

¹⁹ Derrida invokes this sentiment of a concept or thought imposing itself upon oneself in a number of instances: “...the old, worn-out Greek term *aporia*, this tired word of philosophy and of logic, has often imposed itself upon me, and recently it has done so even more often” (*Aporias* 13); “...the different directions in which I have been able to utilize what I would call provisionally the word or concept *differáncé*, or rather let it impose itself on me...” (*Margins of Philosophy* 3); “[In regards to deconstruction] When I chose that word, or when it imposed itself on me...” (“Letter to a Japanese Friend” 1).

In *FH*, plasticity proceeds through three different but interrelated articulations which successively enlarge in scope: its role in the temporal process of self-determining subjectivity; its regulatory functioning in the dialectical system; and, lastly, adumbrations of an ontological meaning beyond the Hegelian system (which are then expanded upon in *HC*). Malabou first discovers this word in the preface to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in the context of Hegel characterizing the formation of subjectivity as being a fundamentally 'plastic' process (Malabou, "CWM" 6). Hegel uses this adjective earlier in the course of his *Aesthetics* in reference to the 'plastic arts', primarily connoting the reception and donation of form with allusions to the work of sculpturing in Greek art (Malabou, *FH* 9). Deriving from the Greek *plassein*, meaning 'to mould', 'plastic' consists of two primary valences: "on the one hand, to be 'susceptible to changes of form' or malleable (clay is a 'plastic' material); and on the other hand, 'having the power to bestow form, the power to mould', as in the expressions, 'plastic surgeon' and 'plastic arts'" (Malabou, *FH* 9). Plasticity thus designates the "ontological seesaw" of matter's own dialectical interplay of activity and passivity, of suture and rupture, of sedimentation and reactivation, of formation and deformation, of the essential capacity to be both given over to the world – susceptible to being shaped by the outside – as well as give shape to itself and the world in which it exists – capable of formation, construction and self-shaping (Malabou, *FH* 188). To clarify, while the primary registers of plasticity expressly concern shaping, becoming and metabolism, it is not, Malabou emphatically maintains, to be confused with polymorphism (*FH* 8)²⁰. Contrary to the implications of

²⁰ This is a qualification that Malabou reiterates rather unequivocally throughout her work: "... 'plasticity' does not mean 'polymorphous'" (*FH* 10); "Plasticity is not polymorphism" (*FH* 180); "...plasticity... involves, not an infinite modifiability—we have not yet come back around to polymorphism..." (*WB* 16); "[o]ne is formed only by virtue of a resistance to form itself; polymorphism, open to all forms, capable of donning all masks, adopting all postures, all attitudes, engenders the undoing of identity... it is not creative, but reproductive and normative" (*WB* 71-2). With such explicit prescriptions to differentiate between plasticity and polymorphism, it again appears strange that some, like Galloway, see Malabou advancing an ethics of perpetual change or becoming in where transformation is an ethical imperative in and of itself ("French Thought Today" 5, 13). Galloway asks: "Why, when we hold a mirror up to nature, do we see nothing reflected back but the mode of production?... shouldn't [Malabou's] reflection of nature show something other than a sad image of a life lived in perpetual triage: separating the good plasticity (self-fashioning) from the bad (the churn of the market)?" (15). As a finite material self, what is life except a perpetual triage and what makes this a 'sad image'? Malabou's point is that as finite expressions of matter, we *do* live on a clock; as matter we are always already changing, fashioning, being adapted and formed if

infinite adaptability or flexibility that undergird the polymorphic, Malabou insists that “[t]hings that are plastic *preserve* their shape, as does the marble in a statue: once given a configuration, it is unable to recover its initial form. ‘Plastic’, thus, designates those things that lend themselves to being formed while *resisting* deformation” (*FH* 9); first emphasis mine). Expanding on this topic in a later work, again articulated through the analogy of sculpting, Malabou writes:

Plastic material retains an imprint and thereby resists endless polymorphism. This is the case, for instance, with sculpted marble. Once the statue is finished, there is no possible return to the indeterminacy of the starting point. So plasticity designates solidity as much as suppleness, designates the definitive character of the imprint, of configuration, or of modification (*WB* 15)

A third importance valence of the concept that Malabou draws out to further demarcate its departure from the smooth continuities of notions like elasticity, adaptability or endless becoming, is plasticity’s annihilative, explosive or destructive capacities. Malabou writes: “A process of formation and of the dissolution of form, plasticity, where all birth takes place, should be imagined fundamentally as an ontological combustion (*déflagration*) which liberates the twofold possibility of the appearance and the annihilation of presence. It is a process which functions on its own, automatically” (*FH* 187). Matter exhibits its own possibility for agency: auto-destruction, self-deformation, interruption; Malabou insists that plasticity, in its simultaneous double semantic inflection, attests to the elemental nature of negativity and contradiction at the very heart of Being itself. This destructive capacity is also simultaneously double: it is monstrous and aleatory – the possibility of matter to internally combust, go awry, destroy and deform itself – but this internal possibility itself offers ontological resources for

we consciously participate, direct or intervene in this process of composition or not. Malabou does not *prescribe* perpetual change, because to do so would be asinine and meaningless: perpetual change happens anyway with or without our consent.

resistance, for matter to direct this negativity and surge up against congealment and petrification– such as the kind of negativity required for socio-political change.

Malabou's reading of Hegel, then, in *FH* unfolds from this initial identification of the clandestine importance of plasticity – the threefold capacity for the reception, donation and destruction of form – for securing and elucidating the intelligibility and potency of Hegel's understanding of the twofold temporality of dialectically self-determining subjectivity. Malabou writes: "...speculative Hegelian philosophy rips the concept [plasticity] away from its strict aesthetic ties (or sculptural ties, to be precise), definitively conferring the metaphysical dignity of an essential characteristic of subjectivity upon it" (*PDW* 13). Plasticity characterizes, for Malabou, the movement of self-determining in subjectivity in Hegel by providing a concept through which the two epochal moments of subjectivity in Hegel – the Greek and the Modern – can be rendered coherent. The Greek moment of subjectivity is that of *substance* represented by Aristotle and the Modern moment is that of *subject* represented by Kant (Malabou, *FH* 16-7). These two moments, the Greek and the Modern, represent two forms of temporality respectively:

On one side, the epoch marked by the repetitions and habits inherent to the teleological process. On the other, the epoch dominated by the singular 'one and only', by the non-habitual, inseparable from the concept of time as external. This confrontation also presents the outline of the future which, henceforth, exists in the play of the habitual and the unusual, but no longer to be understood as two eras of philosophical thought, rather as the two faces, identical in a speculative sense, of one reality.... (Malabou, *FH* 190)

These two temporalities refer to two different regimes of change: one represents the gradual incline, the calm linearity we experience in our everyday life, and the other signifies the ruptural events that re-organize our lives in sharper, sudden fashions. Malabou articulates this double temporality in the phrase *voir venir*, meaning, in English, 'to see (what is) coming'. This sentiment is difficult to adequately translate, but its rendering by Lisabeth During in her translation of *FH* as 'to see (what is) coming'

admirably provides a firm sense of the fraught temporality Malabou is trying to communicate as the lived, contradictory time of the subject. Malabou writes:

‘To see (what is) coming’ denotes at once the visibility and the invisibility of whatever comes. The future is not the absolutely invisible, a subject of pure transcendence objecting to any anticipation at all, to any knowledge, to any speech. Nor is the future the absolutely visible, an object clearly and absolutely foreseen. It frustrates any anticipation by its precipitation, its power to surprise. ‘To see (what is) coming’ thus means to see without seeing – await without awaiting – a future which is neither present to the gaze nor hidden from it (*FH* 184).

As During notes in her preliminary remarks to the text, *voir venir* or ‘to see (what is) coming’ means, at the same time, “to anticipate while know knowing what comes...the parentheses marking the reserve inherent in waiting itself” (*FH* xlix). This strange temporality seeks to express the manner in which our lives unfold through an incessant seesaw of indeterminacy and determinacy, contingency and necessity, accident and essence, as we know that something must come – being finite material beings inexorably moving forward through time – but we can never know exactly what this ‘something’, the to-be-revealed determinate content of the indeterminate, will be. ‘To see (what is) coming’ thus “stands for the operation of synthetic temporalizing in Hegel’s thought, which means it is *the structure of anticipation through which subjectivity projects itself in advance of itself*, and thereby participates in the process of its own determination” (Malabou, *FH* 18; emphasis mine). In this projection out of itself, forward in advance of itself, the subject thus does not imperviously and imperiously move forward, swallowing all differential content like the voracious mouth of a great whale – the stock image of Hegel lodged stubbornly in our intellectual imaginary – but precisely *exposes* itself by thrusting itself forward in and towards a future that it does not know. In the movement of externalization, the subject is made vulnerable to that which it does not see coming, opening itself up to be transformed by an alterity, a surprise of which one sees the indeterminate contours but is partially blind to the determine content: it is passively formed as much as it actively forms. Plasticity, in its meaning to both receive and donate

form, provides the formal structure through which these two moments, these two *ekstases* of time, can co-exist intelligibly in reciprocal determination and dialectical constitution; plasticity names precisely “the condition of possibility” (Malabou, *FH* 18) for this constant (ex)change with one another – the indeterminate and determinate, the contingent and necessary, the accidental and necessary – which creates the moving floor, the *abgrund* ground, that comprises our own subjectivity and experience of the world. For Malabou, Hegel’s philosophy consists primarily in thinking the synthesis of these two temporal modes of subjectivity and it is plasticity which makes this sublation permissible. Taken together, temporality and dialectic, read through plasticity, form the future-oriented anticipatory structure of the contingent metaphysic of the Hegelian subject²¹.

Whereas in the metonymic figures of Aristotle and Kant one facet of the subject is given precedence – substance for the former (one here can include Spinoza), subject for the latter – Malabou’s reading of plasticity in Hegel reveals that a prioritization is both unnecessary and unfeasible, as substance and subject, reception and donation, passivity and activity, synchronic and diachronic, the essential and accidental, are fundamentally equiprimordial or co-constitutive. Malabou writes:

It would be futile to want to determine some ontological priority of essence over accident, or accident over essence, for their co-implication is primary...[w]hether one is prior to the other is not something that can be known. This is what Absolute Knowledge *knows*. Hegelian philosophy assumes as an absolute fact the emergence of the random in the very bosom of necessity and the fact that the random, the aleatory, becomes necessary (*FH* 163).

Malabou strikingly demonstrates here the agile beauty of Hegelian dialectics by revealing the speculative identity of two apparently antinomic ideas, dissolving the rigid demarcation of the accidental and the essential or the contingent and the necessary: that

²¹ One can detect a strong influence of Heidegger here. Malabou’s Hegel is one very much read *through* and *with* Heidegger. To return to a point made before, Malabou’s philosophical interest resides in what *form* of Hegel exists and can exist after Heidegger, Derrida and Deleuze. Malabou thus attempts to determine what form of Hegel is visible, articulable, what form opens up, after his deconstruction.

is, *there is nothing more necessary than the contingent, or essential than the accident*. As soon as the car hits you, your foot slips, the lesion erupts, the flood walls break, these contingencies, these accidents instantaneously pass into their opposites, becoming the heaviest of necessities, coming to transform into essential instances of your life. Equally, as in Malabou's discussion of the naturalizing ideologies of capitalism and metaphysics, there is nothing more accidental or contingent than that which insists on donning the mask of the essential or the necessary. Malabou argues, then, with a Heideggerian inflection, that since the form of the subject exhibits and is able to receive and withstand both these moments of subjectivity, because it is open to harboring both histories of thinking the self without definitively breaking form, it is *virtually* split down the middle by these two moments; there is a "tipping point running straight down the heart of everything – suture and rupture – between a traditional modality of being and a new modality of being" (Malabou, *PDW* 35). Malabou shows through Hegel that the subject is nothing but this plasticity, a fragile, tottering middle point, a to and fro situated right in the middle of the unfolding sculpting that is a lifetime between the giving and receiving of form, shaped by and shaping the world in which one unfurls.

While operating specifically in Hegel's own text as characterizing the interplay of the reception and donation of form in the self-determination of subjectivity, Malabou intuits that plasticity is capable of a substantial enlargement or amplification, that it is able to characterize the *structuring* structure of the movement of the entire dialectical system itself; the supple and determining process of the general ontological movement of the Hegelian dialectic, the creation and dissolution of form characterizes the grandiose becoming of the System itself. After meticulously tracking the local operation of plasticity in Hegel's own discourse concerning subjectivity, Malabou determines that plasticity must be enlarged and elevated to the dignity of a notion through its transformation into a proper philosophical concept, the formation of a proper concept being the operation of

[taking] up a concept (*plasticity*), which has a defined and delimited role in the philosophy of Hegel, only in order to transform it into the sort of comprehensive concept that can 'grasp' (*saisir*) the whole....Transforming plasticity into a

concept is a matter of showing that plasticity ‘seizes’ (*prend*) the philosophy of Hegel and allows the reader to ‘comprehend’ it, appearing at one and the same time as a *structure* and *condition of intelligibility* (Malabou, *FH* 5).

Grasping plasticity as this structuring structure permits Malabou to render the Hegelian system as being open, processual and fluid against the large contingent of detractors who see Hegel as a thinker of a rigid, mechanical dialectical system that harbors no real future or possibility of actual difference, alterity or change. Plasticity salvages the notion of the future in a closed system by showing that the dialectic does not comprise a kind of carnivorous negation that inexorably moves forward, swallowing all difference in the service of a re-assertion of, monological, violent self-identity, but consists in equal measures of both accident and essence, dissolution and creation and the giving and reception of form; it metamorphosizes by means of transformative ruptures which preclude any kind of immutable stability or teleological necessity. Most importantly, Malabou does not jettison the system of Hegelian thought, but re-envisages the system as being plastic, allowing the possibility of change, alterity and a future to organically emerge within the structure of the system itself, as:

plasticity designates the future understood as a future within closure, the possibility of structural formation: a transformation of structure within structure, a mutation ‘right at the level of form’...the possibility of a closed system to welcome new phenomena, all the while transforming itself, is what appears as plasticity. Here again we find the process by which a contingent event, or accident, touches at the heart of the system, and, in the same breath, changes itself into one of the system’s essential elements” (Malabou, *FH* 192-3).

With the stark refutation of any transcendence, exteriority or ‘beyond’, identifying the plasticity of structure, system or form itself permits Malabou to coherently answer the question of: “[w]hat is a ‘way out’; what could a ‘way out’ be when there is no outside, no ‘elsewhere’?” (Malabou, *PDW* 65). Plasticity – the equiprimordial reception and donation of form, the co-constitutive temporal play of the accidental and the essential – provide the resources for conceiving both a tempered freedom and a genuine future

required to think of “how to escape closure...within closure itself” (Malabou, *PDW* 65). Plasticity endows Malabou with the means of thinking how an immanent material system, structure or economy is not necessarily consigned to reductionism, determinism, or mechanism, without future or possibility, but rather how form, structure and system immanently offer the means of difference, alterity and transformation that are traditionally posited as being ‘elsewhere’ or ‘outside’ the materiality of being itself. Plasticity, then, for Malabou, comes to designate – beyond subjectivity and system, however, enfolding and implicating them both – the ontological nature of matter as such, the “*systemic law of the deconstructed real*” (Malabou, *PDW* 56). Plasticity names not only the movement of the becoming of subjectivity and the logic of the dialectical system, but, as Malabou adumbrates in *FH*, the general ontological essence of being itself: “Hegel...shows how the twofold tendency of the becoming essential of the accident and the becoming accidental of essence [plasticity] is constitutive for all life... Ultimately it is a tendency which operates at the level of living. It is automatically inscribed ‘right at the level’ of life” (Malabou, *FH* 193). Indeed, for Malabou, Hegel’s system and thought provide the incipient resources for the elaboration of a purely immanent, materialist ontology, writing: “it is Hegel who will have discovered before its discovery the plastic materiality of being: that free energy, whether organic or synthetic, which circulates throughout in each and every life” (Malabou, *FH* 193).

In *FH*, there is thus a successively concentric enlargement of plasticity’s fields of action, traversing and circulating among the ontological economy of the three lives in Hegel: spiritual (self-determining subjectivity), the logical (the becoming of System) and natural life (the ateleological formation and reformation of matter). The question Malabou proposes to herself is whether or not the semantic and critical amplification of plasticity into a general ontological principle is tenable or not (*PDW* 13, 24). That is, what authorizes this delocalization of plasticity from first, the field of aesthetics, to the domain of subjectivity, to that of system, to her initial inchoate intimations of conferring an ontological meaning on plasticity itself: is plasticity capable of a more radical exportation, can itself change, take another face, figure itself differently? Can plasticity itself go-in-drag (Malabou, *HC* 17,145)? To verify the feasibility or legitimacy of this conceptual expansion, Malabou turns to the work of Heidegger, in which she discerns

between Heideggerian and Hegelian thought a covert *solidity* (PDW 38). Malabou elaborates on her seditious orchestration:

Heidegger never speaks about plasticity. Nor does he ever speak about metamorphosis [traditionally perceived]. And yet, plasticity inscribes the motive of metamorphosis right at the heart of the dialectic, and metamorphosis inscribes the motive of plasticity right at the heart of the thought of being. This intersection pointed the way for *Le Change Heidegger* (PDW 28).

The renegade rapprochement that Malabou seeks to effect between Hegel and Heidegger, one of the daring and truly singular facets of her project, consists in her discernment of their shared positing of articulated, closed structures or systems of being that requires an internal principle of transformation or metamorphosis, that is, plasticity, to make them intelligible. Pursuing her elaboration of a purely immanent new materialism in *HC*, Malabou performs an idiosyncratic and imaginative re-reading of Heidegger that resembles the primary operations of her work on plasticity in Hegel. In the case of Heidegger, Malabou discovers the regulating presence of a marginal group of concepts, what she calls the ‘triad of change’ in Heidegger’s work: the three interrelated terms of change, transformation and metamorphosis (Malabou, *HC* 1). The triad of change, transformation and metamorphosis constitutes, for Malabou, as was with plasticity in Hegel, “the *secret agent* of Heidegger’s philosophy, what *sustains* and *clandestinely* guides the destiny of the essential” (*HC* 7). In tracing the work of these concepts in Heidegger’s work, Malabou argues that Heidegger reveals that a primary (ex)change occurs at the heart of Being and the beginning of philosophy. Her recurring and sustained thesis of this work is to show the “*ontological anteriority of fashioning over essence*” (Malabou, *HC* 91; emphasis mine), to demonstrate that every presence or form is an *entry* into presence or form, a transformation, change or movement into presence (Malabou, *CD* 136); to manifest is to move, to be present is to present, thus the essence of being is not immutability but *mutability*, as beings must move, transform, change or metamorphosize to become, to be present, to be. One could read here Malabou’s attempt to demonstrate not only fashioning’s anteriority to essence, but to the other two ontological principles of 20th century French philosophy, *differánc*e and difference. That

is, to become different or to be a trace is to already have *changed*. To return to the previous discussion of the logic of fetishization, to admit the inconvertibility of a principle such as difference or *différance* is to substantivize and cede ground to the ontological framework one is purportedly disrupting. To posit *change* as primordial, the originary operation of plasticity, of giving and receiving form, is to prohibit, again, any ontological schema who would wish to capitalize on the idea of the absolutely exceptional, the inconvertible, inaccessible beyond. Malabou thus draws on Heidegger to elaborate further her vision of all-encompassing, immanent ontology of an economy of being, where being is not stable, immutable or fixed, but convertible, transformable and able to change or be changed, that contrary to traditional metaphysics: “[n]othing, for Heidegger, escapes (ex)change or convertibility. It must be repeated...ontology is the structure of transformation alone. Being is nothing but (its) transformability” (Malabou, *HC* 73); “Being is *nothing but* its plasticity” (Malabou, *PDW* 36).

The dawn of metaphysics, which bequeaths to us our understanding of essence or spirit as unchangeable, originates with a fundamental *méconnaissance*, what Malabou calls, among many variegated expressions, the substitution or (ex)change of *being* for *beingness*. This is the conversion of being/essence/spirit understood as mutable for being/essence/spirit as truly or actually immutable, prompting the fundamental cleavage between ontic and ontological, matter and spirit, form and essence that structures the history of metaphysical, and hence philosophical, thought. Heidegger and Malabou locate the symbolic scene of this transformation as the “Allegory of the Cave”, where Plato arbitrates the (ex)change, trade or conversion that metamorphosizes the nature of being into “true” Being: that is, Being understood in the traditional metaphysical sense of hidden, associated with the realm of ideal, stable and immutable essences. In this moment, Malabou argues, following Heidegger, Plato brokers a fundamental (ex)change, de-privileging and displacing the truth of being as ontic – as appearance, figure or form, the mutable – for the truth of Being as beingness, as spirit, essence, the idea, the immutable. This moment constitutes the originary mutation, the transformation or change of Being itself: being is (ex)changed with itself, the mutable nature of being metamorphosized and presented as the immutable, as essence and truth. Malabou thus argues that traditional metaphysical understandings of notions such as essence, presence

and being – taken to be fundamentally immutable and fixed – had to be and were initially transformed or changed *into themselves*, that is, they are ontologically mutable or fashioned: The fundamental (ex)change of “mutability for its opposite [immutability, fixity, beingness] is exactly what originally gives change in philosophy...” (Malabou, *HC* 17).

For Malabou, Heidegger provides the aperture through which to seize this inaugural moment of transformation where the mutability and materiality of being take decisively different forms as “Beingness takes being’s place [and being] ‘enters its service’” (Malabou, *HC* 17); “this originary (ex)change – ontological mastery and servitude – corresponds to the going-in-drag [*travestissement*] of essence, and is the most basic resource of metaphysics” (Malabou, *HC* 17). Metaphysics, the way in which it has articulated the relationship of essence and form, spirit and matter, has attempted to from the very beginning instigate a fundamental dissociation between the two, has from the very beginning acted in bad faith by asserting that

form can be thought separately from the nature of the being that transforms itself...form is presented as skin, vestment or finery...that one can always leave without an alteration in what is essential...as if one could always rid oneself of form, as if, in the evening, form [matter] could be left hanging like a garment on the chair of being or essence [spirit]. In metaphysics form can always change, but the nature of being persists. It is this that is debatable... (Malabou, *OA* 17)

In her work on Heidegger then, Malabou attempts to demonstrate ontologically that the metaphysical severance of the essential and the accidental, spirit and matter, essence and form is based on a “misunderstanding”, that “ ‘essence’... has only ever designed, under the skin of metaphysics and despite ontological dogma, the transformability of beings, never their substantial stability. In the end essence does not say presence; it says *entry* into presence, in other words, an originary movement that, again, is a movement of change or exchange” (Malabou, *CD* 136). Yet, Malabou identifies, as a devoted dialectician, that this very metaphysical splitting of form and essence, contrary to the wishes of metaphysics, has engendered from the very beginning the means by which this

ostensibly immutable separation is to be overcome. The privileging of beingness over being that gives form to traditional metaphysics is at once a transformation and a displacement that – we can see the Derridean influence on Malabou’s thinking here²² – creates metaphysics – being as beingness – and simultaneously produces that which it seeks to de-privilege and suppress, what Malabou calls “the other thinking” or the “other thought” or “other beginning”. That is: the inauguration of metaphysics in the change from mutability to immutability, in it being a change, paradoxically creates and performs the conditions of mutability that will come to undo the immutability metaphysics seeks to achieve; the fact that being can be ontologically transformed or exchanged for a new understanding of being as beingness demonstrates its essential (ex)changeability. Metaphysics, emerging through an original (ex)change, can then conceivably transform *again*; it can *shed its skin*. Malabou writes:

Imagine metaphysics shedding its skin...the skin is that of essence, the image, value, and substitute for being that was formed in exchange. Imagine metaphysics sloughing off its (ex)change. Imagine metaphysics changing. Yes, changing, as though it were undressing itself” (Malabou, *HC* 96).

Grasping the initial production of the division of Being into being and beingness, form and essence, matter and spirit as a transformation, metamorphosis or change engenders the requisite antimony to ground a dialectic of transformation from the production of an immanent difference within Being itself: Being opens up a space within Being between two forms of itself and the interaction of these two forms constitutes the requisite material for immanent mutability and transformation without alterity²³. This is to say,

²² Jacques Derrida was Malabou’s doctoral supervisor and a significant theoretical influence. See Malabou’s essays “Grammatology and Plasticity” and “The phoenix, the spider and the salamander” in *Changing Difference* and her book *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing* for a sustained engagement with Derrida’s thought.

²³ Malabou likens this to transsubjectivation in the work of Michel Foucault: “...transsubjectivation...consists in a trajectory *within* the self. This transsubjectivation doesn’t mean that you become different from what you used to be, nor that you are able to absorb the other’s difference, but that you open up a space within yourself between two forms of yourself. That you oppose two forms of yourself within yourself...There would then be a kind of transformation which would sublimate the difference between the self and itself, which would create, produce a new self as a result of the opposition between

there is absolutely no substantial, rigid, necessary distinction to be made between form and essence, matter and spirit, accident and essence. The nature of the real, as plasticity, prescribes nothing but the constancy of change, transformation and metamorphosis; a law which strictly contravenes the metaphysical attempt to partition being into neatly bifurcated pairs of immutability and mutability, spirit and matter, essence and form. Recognizing ontological mutability means acknowledging the true plasticity – the changeability, transformability and metamorphic nature – of being itself, of seeing the profound interaction and mutual constitution of form and essence, of matter and spirit; change of form implies a corollary change in essence, and a change of essence necessitates a change in form, being is comprised by the ineluctable dialectical interplay of both. It is this fundamental “mutability of beings”, Malabou writes, that “opens a future in the absence of any openness in the world” (*PDW* 78).

Identifying this originary ontological mutability in Heidegger, Malabou argues, permits her to locate, supplement and validate the ontological amplification of plasticity that she gestures to at the end of *FH* as she finds Heidegger provides: “...the nondialectical origin (that is, *ontological*) of the dialectic...Traced back to this origin, the “no” turns out to be nothing but a “ ‘yes’ to the annihilation of being...”...that is, it is in fact a “yes” to its transformability or mutability (*PDW* 36; emphasis mine). What Malabou detects only inchoately in Hegel’s thought – as she adumbrates at the end of *FH*, the capacity for plasticity to characterize a general ontology based on the dual active/passive nature of being – is confirmed by way of Heidegger’s thinking of metamorphosis, of the absolute exchangeability of being itself. Malabou explains that the discovery and sustained consideration of the triad of change – change, transformation and metamorphosis – in Heidegger’s thought opens “...the possibility of conferring an *ontological* meaning on plasticity”, allowing her “to export the concept, explicitly and consciously, outside the dialectical framework – a framework that it had already exceeded in *The Future of Hegel*

two forms at work in the self. Plasticity might be the name of this transsubjectivation” (Malabou, “CWM” 5).

but in too indeterminate a fashion” (*PDW* 36). Tracing the metabolic movement of the triad of change in Heidegger’s own philosophical economy, Malabou recognizes the operation of the reception, donation and changing of form that Hegel had designated as plasticity. For the both plastic subject and system to exist, being *itself* must too fundamentally exhibit these same traits. Heidegger’s metamorphic ontology thus corroborates the moving ground of being that makes possible Malabou’s reading of the plasticity of subject and system in *FH*. Malabou thus orchestrates a plastic exchange whereby Hegel and Heidegger mutually illuminate and supplement one another, soldering them together in a philosophical face-to-face that is at once a suturing and a rupturing: Heidegger provides Hegel with the ontological grounding of the dialectic, where plasticity loses its name for a moment to become metamorphosis (Malabou, *PDW* 37) and, with plasticity,

it is as if Hegel retrospectively has offered to [Heidegger] an instrument indispensable to the intelligibility of his [own] ideas. The times of Hegel’s philosophy, with a generosity Heidegger consistently denies, were perhaps generous enough to offer him a name for his own time of ontological difference...Perhaps what the notion of plasticity makes possible is a way to conceive the characteristics of authentic temporality which Heidegger himself brought out (Malabou, *FH* 192; 191).

Before proceeding, it warrants noting that the rapprochement Malabou enacts/stages between Hegel and Heidegger is, perhaps, an outwardly strained coupling. One could say – and, admittedly, without fault – that it potentially bears the mark of a conscious, coordinated appeal to the counterintuitive, the kind of deliberative juxtaposition designed to provoke that often subtends the (now familiar) defamiliarizing rhetorical strategies characteristic of much postmodern and consequent contemporary theory. Malabou’s ‘plastic’ readings could thus be, conceivably, cynically dismissed as another product of the excessive liberties and abuse of license that seem all too often to plague our post-Barthesian and Foucauldian intellectual landscape. Indeed, Malabou’s solicitation of the

reader to pursue this untraveled path is in itself a perfect encapsulation of plasticity's profound import for the act and event of reading itself²⁴: are we capable of letting go of our particular 'I', the form of ourselves, which initially enters our engagement with a new text? Are we capable of suspending what we think we know of the forms of both Hegel and Heidegger so that both we and themselves may be transformed? Or are we determined to refuse surprise, to insist upon maintaining the essential, familiar form of both them and ourselves through our encounter with this accidental union, in placing them in a proximity which discomfits our habituated understanding? In regards to this point, Malabou references Maurice Blanchot's *The Space of Literature* in her meditation on the plasticity inherent in the act of reading and the concomitant task of thinking: "What threatens reading is this: the reader's reality, his personality, his immodesty, his stubborn insistence upon remaining himself in the face of what he reads..." (Quoted in Malabou, *FH* 182). It is precisely, Malabou writes, the immodesty of the 'knowing I', which clings to itself in self-certainty, that "occults true reading" (*FH* 182). It is, in fact, exactly the opposite, "[t]he letting-go of the Self in the act of reading...[that] produces the condition of the possibility of decision" (*FH* 182), the genuine opening of the possibility of a new reading, a new form to take shape, a truly reciprocal exchange and transformation of the reader and the text²⁵.

Malabou's proposed proximity of Hegel and Heidegger demands and deserves such a generosity on behalf of her interlocutors. In committing to open ourselves up and follow Malabou's invitation to let the forms of Hegel and Heidegger de-ossify, they alchemize, becoming re-actualized, transformed and emerge anew in their clandestine crossing, the

²⁴ Malabou's elaboration of the plasticity of reading in regards to the Hegelian differences between predicative or ratiocinative and properly speculative propositions is a stunning and moving account of the possibilities for transformative reading. Her account, articulated through Hegel, has much to offer to literary theory and practice and for the humanities – embroiled as they are in a seemingly interminable defence of the value of reading – in general. See *FH* 176-183.

²⁵ Here, again, is a striking demonstration of how plasticity does seem to characterize the very essence of Hegel's thinking, as Hegel concurs with both Blanchot and Malabou in writing that philosophy or thinking depends upon the relinquishment of "any personal intrusions into the immanent rhythm of the concept, and not intervene in it either arbitrarily or with wisdom obtained elsewhere" (Quoted in Malabou, *FH* 182). In Heidegger one finds a similar prescription, to open oneself up to and follow the path of thinking, to heed the call of that which both appears and withdraws from us.

meeting point of which is the essential fulcrum of Malabou's vision of a new materialism: a thinking of closed, immanent materiality that does not require transcendence to account for change, but locates the capacity of transformation – spirit – right within the closure of this structure or system – matter – itself. The hitherto unacknowledged profound consonance Malabou uncovers between Heidegger and Hegel is precisely the shared commitment to the ontological primordially of change itself; that being's principle, defining characteristic is its immanent self-sufficient capacity for transformation. What Malabou unearths in Hegel and Heidegger is the possibility to think a closed, immanent economy of being that can internally account for alterity, change, difference, she unveils the “the plastic materiality of being: that free energy, whether organic or synthetic, which circulates throughout in each and every life” (Malabou, *FH* 193). Through reading Heidegger and Hegel across and through one another, transforming them, Malabou discovers the resources for conceiving her vision of a thoroughly closed, materialist ontological system, one that is not restrictive or static, mechanistic or reductive, but immanently fluid and open because, in the course of her philosophical search, she determines that “*Being is none other than changing forms; being is nothing but its own mutability*” (Malabou, *PDW* 43, 78; emphasis mine), because,

plasticity...is so fundamental (the mutability of presence is older than presence) that there is no perhaps no reason to talk of the plasticity of Being – as if plasticity were some kind of quality – but of saying that *Being is nothing but its plasticity*” (*PDW* 36; emphasis mine)

Like the anticlimactic nature of Absolute Knowledge in Hegel or the withdrawal of Being in Heidegger, Malabou's ultimate ontological conclusion (and subsequent ontological premise) seems to meld at once the deflatingly prosaic and the debilitatingly profound: what she asserts is the sheer, plain fact that Being – that is the matter or materiality that we are and which we are enmeshed/embedded – is absolutely indifferent, utterly bereft of any modicum of transcendent design or guarantee. It is essentially only materialized contingency. Being is nothing but its *plasticity*: the systemic law of the deconstructed real is simply finite matter's ontological capacity to form, be formed and perish. One is,

ultimately, nothing less and nothing more. This movement of materiality is *automatic*. Plasticity names the ateleological speculative automatism of the closed economy of Being, automatism naming the dialectical interplay of the essential and accidental embedded in automatism's definition as 'that which happens on its own': autonomously – "what happens by itself out of necessity, its own internal necessity" – or heteronomously – "what happens by itself...by accident or chance" (Malabou, *FH* 160). Plasticity – thus Being, matter, life – is without prescription or purpose, it is *only* possibility. Yet despite the affirmative valences that seem to inflect possibility in most theoretical discourse, plasticity and possibility are not inherently progressive or positive. Possibility is equally as monstrous as it is beautiful because, as possibility, it promises *nothing* but a future, that something will happen. Possibility, this future, is, as Malabou described it, characterized by the existential temporality of *voir venir*, to see (what is) coming. One sees without seeing. You know only that something will happen, but not what; you will simply be shaped by accidents you did not see coming, and, in turn, respond, shaping them and yourself in return. "A lifetime always proceeds", then, for Malabou, in the terminal rhythmic unfolding, the ontological seesaw between the "boundaries of a double excess: an excess of reification and an excess of fluidification" (*PDW* 81). Matter contracts, stabilizes, congeals, presents itself, transforms, changes, which is to say, withers or reforms or deforms. All plasticity designates is matter's possibility: the possibility to change, stay the same or explode; being changes, is mutable, characterized by a purely indifferent movement of reformation and formation of the real or matter itself. This is the ontological basis of the vision of Malabou's immanent new materialism of which plasticity is required as its condition of possibility and intelligibility. With plasticity, Malabou discovers the requisite ontological principle adequate to characterize her immanent vision of being qua being that requires no reliance or admittance of any exteriority or outside because the capacities for non-determination and transformation are sublated within, seen to be immanent or internal to, materiality, being and the real itself.

1.4 Neuroplasticity as Expression of the Ontological Real

Having established the philosophical bases for her new materialism through the elaboration of an ontological account of plasticity – plasticity as immanent Being’s universal capacity to give, receive and annihilate form – Malabou moves in the next phase of her project to determine the extent to which plasticity expresses itself in the materiality of the subject. Malabou seeks to provide the necessary account of what subject inhabits this ontological real of plasticity; that is, if the real, being or materiality is to be conceived as such, what evidence is there that the subject that inhabits this closed, immanent economy of being reflects, refracts or exhibits the same nature as this ontological plasticity? Here, Malabou’s itinerary takes its most recognized and idiosyncratic turn towards an explicit engagement with neuroscience and cerebral plasticity as the grounds for continuing her materialist ontology of plasticity. Again, one may be justified in evincing a certain incredulity towards the synthesis of these rather outwardly disparate orientations: what does a materialist ontology, conceived through Hegel and Heidegger, belonging to the tradition of antiscientific continental philosophy, have to do with neurosciences? Malabou, again, quite self-conscious of possible suspicions regarding her apparent eclecticism, admits:

neurobiology and Hegelian philosophy may seem very remote at first sight. [But] in fact, the concept of “plasticity”, which plays a major role within both of them, *has the same meaning*: it characterizes a certain kind of organization, the *system’s* one. Between the system of absolute knowledge or of absolute subjectivity in Hegel and the nervous system in neurobiology, the difference is not so dramatic. It is the same mode of being, the same functioning, the same economy...(Malabou, “CWM” 6; emphasis mine).

Again, in *WB*, she preempts readers who would look askance at her foray into neuroscientific literature writing: “Speaking for myself, I would say that I have been

interested for a long time in plasticity, whose genesis and whose meaning in the philosophical tradition I have, in previous efforts, attempted to elucidate and reconstitute” (Malabou 14). For Malabou, what “unifies the self-organization of subjectivity (Hegel’s temporization), the economy of ontological exchangeability (Heidegger’s transformation) and the constitution of momentary, always metamorphosable, always transformable configurations, which constitute the architecture of thought (the synaptic organization)” is exactly this “plastic bond” (*PDW* 61). What Malabou detects in neuroscience’s account of cerebral plasticity is the elaboration of a “regime of systematic self-organization that is based on the ability of an organism to integrate the modifications that it experiences and to modify them in return” (*PDW* 61) – a characterization entirely consonant with her account of ontological plasticity in Hegel and Heidegger. Indeed, Malabou’s engagement with the neurosciences serves to further confirm her postulation of plasticity as the fundamental ontological of Being as such. Malabou writes: “[my] study of neuronal plasticity and cerebral functioning...have been a true test as well as a confirmation, a renewal and concretization of the philosophical meaning of plasticity. The critical epistemological exercise carried out in [*WB*] thus presents itself as an enterprise of rectification and sharpening of the usage of this concept” (*WB* 14). Malabou’s works *WB*, *NW* and *OA* thus comprise explications of how the material base of the subject – the brain – exhibits the same plastic economy of the giving, reception and annihilation of form that she develops in her ontologically oriented philosophical elaborations of Hegel and Heidegger; neuronal plasticity, for Malabou, is an expression of the more fundamental plastic economy of being itself. Like the dialectical system of Hegel and the ontological economy of Heidegger, Malabou argues that the brain is a closed form of self-organization, a dynamic structure that is not articulated once and for all – a genetically predetermined or programmed brain, a system or structure without a future, surprise or transformation – but one that consistently *articulates* itself, that both gives itself and receives form, seesawing between passivity and activity, formation and reformation, constancy and change, homeostasis and self-generation, sedimentation and explosion. In the same way that Hegel and Heidegger, in Malabou’s reading, untether structure, system and economy from any transcendent necessity or reductionism, Malabou contends that contemporary neuroscience emancipates the brain from claims of reductionism or

determinism by proving and affirming the brain's inherent plasticity: the fact that the brain is a form that undergoes and creates its own change, that transforms itself over and through time in a dialectical play between it and its environs.

Malabou's *WB* addresses the constructive or positive nature of plasticity: the capacity for the brain to actively transform itself. In contrast to more traditional conceptions of the brain as a rigidly determined organ, Malabou draws from contemporary neuroscience to explicate the brain as an essentially processual and open entity, a contradictory economy that moves, in its terminal lifespan, between various constitutive moments of determination and indetermination. Again, Malabou illustrates her understanding of the brain through the analogy of sculpture. Each brain, Malabou argues, begins as a kind of Hegelian universal – a “proto-self” that is a relatively indeterminate substantial form or template (*WB* 21) which everyone shares, comprised of basic developmental synaptic networks in place through evolutionary genetics – which is successively shaped and formed through plastic modulational capacities by this brain's particularized history – the constitution of a “core-self” composed of the contingent situation or socio-historical and cultural matrices one is ‘thrown’ into – leading to the processual sculpturing of a singularized self – the “auto-biographical self” which consists in the sculptural reflective process of the rejection or appropriation of these inherited norms and a concomitant project of fashioning new ones. Thus, Malabou argues, “even if all human brains resemble each other with respect to their anatomy, no two brains are identical with respect to their history...our brain is essentially...*what we do with it*” (*WB* 24, 30). Because the brain is *what we do with it*, Malabou thus petitions, in a neurobiological permutation of Marx, for “an awakening of the consciousness of the brain”, that is, of the neurological real of the brain's *plasticity*, “a comprehension of the transition from the neuronal to the mental, a comprehension of cerebral change” (*WB* 66). At stake, for Malabou, in these discourses of neuroscientific plasticity is precisely a kind of epistemo-ontological validation of the actuality of freedom:

If we do not think through...this plasticity, we dodge the most important question, which is that of freedom. If, in effect, the life of the brain is played out between program and deprogramming, between determinism and the possibility of

changing difference, then the transition from the proto-self to the self is indeed the transition from the undifferentiated to the possibility of a transdifferentiation of self – the self, between receiving and giving form, being at once what one inherits and what one has created (*WB* 69).

The contemporary confirmation of “brain plasticity constitutes a possible margin of improvisation with regard to genetic necessity” (Malabou, *WB* 7) providing perhaps evidence that ossified bifurcations between agency/structure, freedom/determinism, spirit/matter or anti-reductionism/reductionism are no longer adequate paradigms through which to address the subject because these dichotomies can no longer be treated, in good faith, as stable independent options, but only dialectically related moments; any affirmed division between the two is chimeric and outmoded. The discoveries of neuroplasticity indeed evince an affinity with, or perhaps even vindicate, a Hegelian reading of subjectivity based on dialectical negation as they affirm that a literal dialectic exists as the motor of change at the level of biological matter:

[t]he dialectical nature of identity is rooted in the very *nature* of identity, that is to say, in its biological foundation...structured by the dialectical play of the emergence and annihilation of form...the historico-cultural fashioning of the self is possible only by virtue of this primary and natural economy of contradiction (*WB* 72)

Continuing further: “Thus the transition from a purely biological entity to a mental entity takes place in the struggle of the one against the other, producing the truth of their relation. Thought is therefore nothing but nature, but a negated nature, marked by its own difference from itself” (Malabou, *WB* 81). It is this aspect of resistance or negation at the level of matter itself which opens up the space for improvisation or freedom in lieu of synaptic determination. Again, remembering Malabou’s refutation of all transcendents, neuroplasticity confirms a closed system – the brain – that does not require, for freedom, difference or change, a transcendent subject that would activate it from an exterior, stable referent point, but immanently contains its own capacity for transdifferentiation and self-determination. In this, the functioning contradictory economy of the brain – a self-

sculpturing and sculpted open project – expresses the ontological real of the plasticity of being qua being.

The petition to recognize one's own plastic capacity for transformation does not, however, strictly pertain to the individual level. There is a fundamental socio-political register to Malabou's argument for an awakening of a consciousness of the plasticity of the brain. Malabou identifies the import of plasticity to the socio-political as such: the truth is that the brain – and thus we ourselves, and, implicitly, our social organizations and our world, the finite materiality of which we and all our horizons are composed – is plastic but the problem is that the truth of this ontological and neurological real is occluded as we are made to think that we are, in her language, merely flexible. This dyadic opposition is the axis upon which Malabou's text choreographically swings: plasticity versus flexibility. The neurological and ontological real is plastic – form is capable of *active* transformation without pre-programmed, teleological necessity or determination – but this truth is consistently obfuscated or concealed through the ideological avatar of flexibility, the idea that there are certain given, natural parameters – a transcendentalization of structure – to which we can only *reactively* acquiesce, accede or adapt. Here, Malabou reprises her analysis of the obfuscatory logics of metaphysics and capitalism which present themselves as fixed, natural or necessary: the law of flexibility is a permutation of this logic of exemption in that there is a *transcendentalization* of form or structure that encourages the notion that we can only comport ourselves in accordance with the possibilities inscribed within and prescribed by the given situation; we do not countenance that the form or structure itself can change – a change of form or system is itself structurally prohibited by the metaphysic of flexibility because form or system are naturalized, transcendentalized, exempted from the economy of change itself. Malabou here sets to expose the manner in which discourses of neuroscience and socio-political and economic organization (for all intents and purposes, capitalism) mutually buttress one another in a feedback loop of reciprocal naturalization. To this end, Malabou writes:

It is therefore inevitable that at the horizon of the objective descriptions of brain plasticity stand questions concerning social life and being together. To expedite

matters let us reduce these to one option: Does brain plasticity, taken as a model, allow us to think a multiplicity of interactions in which the participants exercise transformative effects on one another through the demands of recognition, of non-domination, and of liberty? Or must we claim, on the contrary, that, between determinism and polyvalence, brain plasticity constitutes the biological justification of a type of economic, political, and social organization in which all that matters is the result of action as such: efficacy, adaptability – unfailing flexibility?” (WB 31)

Malabou’s entreaty “to ask ‘what should we do with our brain?’” (WB 79), then, is not merely a call for atomistic or personal self-fashioning, but is a solicitation to re-engage a sense of collective responsibility in designating the question as one of ‘we’. The question is not, as it is in so many different instances of self-help literature, what can *you* do with *your* brain to become more efficient, productive or happy, but is precisely what should *we* do with *our* brain: in the sense of Hegelian *Geist*, what should *we* do with *our* shared, collective brain when we realize what it *can* do, that is, when we realize our plastic possibility? To pose the question of ‘what should we do with our brain’ is to admit the possibility of actively constructing this sense of a ‘we’, a ‘we’ that has been systemically eradicated in the atomistic fragmentation of neoliberal democracy. Claiming ‘what should we do with our brain?’ as a genuine question,

is above all to visualize the possibility of saying no to an afflicting, economic, political and mediatic culture that celebrates only the triumph of flexibility, blessing obedient individuals who have no greater merit than that of knowing how to bow their heads with a smile (WB 79)

What is the minimal response to this question for Malabou? We should refuse to treat the present as the index and exhaustion of the possible, that is, we should resist flexibility and realize our plasticity: “Not to replicate the caricature of the world: this is what we should do with our brain” (WB 78).

Whereas WB is concerned with articulating the positive or constructive nature of plasticity and its possibility for emancipatory change, Malabou’s two subsequent works

engaging neuroscience – *NW* and *OA* – address the darker, aleatory and indifferent side of plasticity, what Malabou names destructive plasticity. Malabou pursues the elaboration of this negative side of plasticity out of an identification of the overly curative or compensatory nature of plasticity’s characterization in critical and scientific literature (*NW* 200). “In science, medicine, art, and education”, Malabou observes,

the connotations of the term ‘plasticity’ are always positive. Plasticity refers to an equilibrium between the receiving and giving of form. It is understood as a sort of natural sculpting that forms our identity, an identity modeled by experience and that makes us subjects of a history, a singular, recognizable, identifiable history, with all its events, gaps, and future (*OA* 3)

What remains lacking in these accounts of plasticity, and thus, of the ontological real of matter, for Malabou, is the no less possible manifestation of plasticity’s power to interrupt without reprieve or purpose, to indifferently destroy without an inkling of discretion. While unexpected encounters are typically framed fortuitously (especially within the discourse of academic theory) as moments which engender the possibility of the new, the unforeseen, of change, there is a tendency to normatively render these moments as intrinsically positive: change or the new is good in itself. This fervency for the rupture which begets the new is a fetishization. Destructive plasticity, the accidents we did not see coming but must suffer anyway, are typically domesticated as *aberrations*: they are deviations from the normal course of things and, as such, in their anomalous occurrence, can be quarantined and contained. However, there is no such thing as an aberration, ontologically speaking, if there is no natural order to violate or a transcendent metric against which to measure. The accident is as much *essentially* part of being as anything else. In regards to the plasticity of matter, of being as such, there is no reason why one’s loved one should not be stricken by Alzheimer’s, a hemorrhage, a lesion that definitively cuts into one’s biographical life. The power of destructive plasticity is matter’s immanent capacity of a “power of change without redemption, without teleology, without any meaning other than strangeness” (Malabou, *OA* 24). The problem here, for Malabou, is precisely the way that the meaningless accident is framed as a purely external, contingent effraction and not as a ceaseless properly immanent

“existential potential [of] the subject” itself (OA 30). The failure of existing accounts of plasticity is that:

The possibility of an identity change by destruction, the possibility of an annihilating metamorphosis, does not appear as constant virtuality of being, inscribed in it as an eventuality, understood within its biological and ontological fate. Destruction remains an accident while really, to make a pun that suggests that the accident is a property of the species, destruction should be seen as a species of the accident, so that the ability to transform oneself under the effect of destruction is a possibility, an existential structure...[a]n identity change is not only the consequence of an external event, arising from pure chance, affecting and altering an originally stable identity. Normal identity is changeable and transformable entity right from the start, always liable to make a *faux bond* or to say farewell to itself (Malabou, OA 30-1)

What is occluded in conventional renderings of plasticity in its curative and compensatory capacities, is the no less prominent valence of the very real possibility of absolute destitution – the annihilation or destruction of form – at any given moment bereft of etiology or sense. The possibility of this complete destitution is again not anomalous but a positive ontological condition on account of the materiality of the subject:

The destructive event – whether it is of biological or sociopolitical origin – causes irreversible transformations of the emotional brain, and thus of a radical metamorphosis of identity, emerges as a constant existential possibility that threatens each of us at every moment (Malabou, NW 213).

What Malabou proposes is a rethinking of the ontology of the accident: that, like her sublation of transcendent properties into the immanence of matter, one must likewise introduce the existence of pure contingency, of the accident, as an internal, essential facet of matter itself. The accident is not an aberration of but a natural expression of matter’s own potentiality, its plasticity: possibility, construed properly, does not admit just a “good” possibility but equally must admit the equivalent ontological possibility of that

which is monstrous; the lesion, the onset of Alzheimer's, the natural catastrophe, the violence of matter's gambits of indiscriminate contingency. Nothing is sacrosanct and all is permitted. Malabou's insistence upon the actuality of destructive plasticity is tied, again, to her over-arching refutation of the transcendent. If there is legitimately no admitted transcendent order, no absolute manner in which things are 'supposed to be', one cannot refuse to concede the ontological propriety of the accidental and aleatory as essential, natural elements of the movement of the plasticity of being qua being. Indeed, the discomfiting truth which Malabou pushes the reader to reconcile is that "destruction too is formative. A smashed-up face is still a face, a stump a limb, a traumatized psyche remains a psyche. Destruction has its own sculpting tools" (*OA* 4). These are not ontological deviations or aberrations but only transformations, only metamorphoses of form – plasticity, as ontological, is without prescription, purpose or any inherent normativity. If one follows Malabou's line of reasoning to the logical end, even the common apocalyptic omen of the 'world ending' is unintelligible, a case of wishful thinking tethered to an idea of something like a 'world' actually substantially existing. The world 'ending' means nothing but another transformation as "a smashed-up face is still a face, a stump a limb", a decimated earth is still, after its destruction, a form that will have its own shape: albeit one we do not recognize. The cruelty of Malabou's materialist vision here, then, comes in debilitating relief. The affirmation of the existence of destructive plasticity – the irruption of a negativity without sublation – is to coldly accept the fact that the Real or Being, in its aleatory and indifferent nature, fundamentally resists any legitimate hermeneutical recuperation: it is the death of any narrative into which a meaning that would resist its own de(con)struction could be woven or stitched. The truth of ontological being, as plasticity, is that things just can change: for the better or for the worse, can stay the same or not. It makes absolutely *no* difference to anything. Malabou's thinking of plasticity leads us here: a sheer vacancy of purpose that presses upon us in its unbearable saturation.

Chapter 2

2 Habit

From now on we can no longer have anything to do with things other than our own habits...Thought's very life depends on its power to awaken that vital energy which always tends to mortify itself, to become sedimented into fixed and rigid positions. The outcome that will follow depends on this awakening: thought has nothing to do but wait for the habitués to look at their habits – Malabou, *FH* 190

This chapter continues the argument developed in the last section concerning the ontological status of plasticity and the requisite need for an elaborated theory of embodied material activity that is commensurate with Malabou's plastic ontology, which I submit is found in the concept of habit. If the nature of material being is plastic, this means that all of finite being is a malleable substance whose *essence* is its *lack of essence*, meaning, that it is without an inherently absolute or transcendent *telos*, purpose, or any preformational design whatsoever: it is a matter of construction, constitution, and fashioning. As such, habit becomes critical to thinking a materialist theory of subjectivity immanent to the ontological real Malabou describes. Plasticity is the condition of possibility for the existence of habit and habit is the phenomenon through which materiality, because of its plasticity, is shaped and formed. What connects habit to plasticity, Malabou argues, is Hegel's announcement of habit as 'a work of art of the soul' (*FH* 25) – it is the sculpting – both passively by internal and external forces and actively by one's own direction – of the material substance of the subject and its world. Habit, Malabou reads from Hegel, is this constitutive work of self-formation that transforms one's biological first nature into a historically or experientially fashioned or sculpted 'second nature' that becomes the singularized self or subject. Indeed, Malabou goes so far as to say that habit is *synonymous* with 'second nature' and therefore, since there is decisively no longer any substantial first nature in the ontological framework of Malabou elaborated here – as we remember from Malabou's reading of Heidegger

concerning the ontological anteriority of fashioning over essence: any form, materiality or presence entails a more originary entry or transformation *into* form, materiality or presence – habit, or ‘second nature’, becomes of vital importance in the constitution of subjectivity and the world in which we inhabit; there is nothing outside of the maintenance, creation or destruction of habits, as there are only ever ‘second’ natures. In this way, Malabou’s materialism affirms in unison with Gilles Deleuze that “[w]e are habits, nothing but habits – the habit of saying ‘I’” (*Empiricism and Subjectivity* x)²⁶ when she writes that “[f]rom now on we can no longer have anything to do with things other than our own habits” (*FH* 190) as that is all of which that we are composed.

This chapter will proceed by first adducing Malabou’s discussion of habit in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Mind*, drawn from her first work *FH*. In elaborating Malabou’s account, I will gesture to how this explication of habit – particularly the dialectical interplay between the Hegelian terms of universal, particular and singular – is consistent with Malabou’s reading of the neurological constitution of identity – the dialectical move from the ‘neuronal’ to the ‘mental’ – elaborated in *WB*. Following from this, I contend that Malabou insufficiently emphasizes the centrality of habit to the intelligibility of her philosophical project as ontological plasticity requires a practical expression, a way of putting plasticity ‘to work’, in order for it to have the critical import she envisages. I will then expand and supplement Malabou’s account of habit, then, in two ways. First, I identify a missed opportunity for Malabou to emphasize the socio-political, and not just

²⁶The ‘self’, ‘subject’ or ‘I’ is a habit in so far as it is a dynamic equilibrium between preservation and change, sedimentation and fluidification, formation and deformation in a processual state of sculpturing or construction which is, simultaneously, an interminable undoing and deconstruction: a habit is something which lacks a substantive or preformed identity or essence, the essence of the subject and world of habit being its *lack of essence*. The difference to be marked from a broadly Deleuzian conception of habit is that the subject envisaged by Malabou, through Hegel and Heidegger, is one that can intervene or ‘get on top of’ and reflectively participate in the formation of its material bases – it is not purely subjected to or determined by a transcendental field of singularities or a virtual flux of Being that one subscribes to in endorsing the Neo-Spinozism of Deleuze. Nor is the subject of habit construed through Malabou a purely independent entity that emerges from its material bases and achieves full autonomy as one finds in the Neo-Hegelianisms of Adrian Johnston and Slavoj Žižek. Malabou, like her reading of plasticity, situates itself in the middle of these two extremes as the self is initially constituted by and always susceptible to forces it cannot control (the determinism of substance found in Deleuzian Neo-Spinozisms) but is also simultaneously capable of concerted self-formation and participating in the construction of its world (the agency of the subject emphasized in contemporary Neo-Hegelianisms).

ontological-individual, importance of habit by transposing her analysis of ontological-individual habit in *Philosophy of Mind* to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* in where habit plays a critical role in the constitution of ethical or shared socio-political life. By redoubling Malabou's reading of habit in the *Philosophy of Mind* to the *Philosophy of Right* – and, as I indicated above, illustrating the correspondences with her elaboration of neuroplasticity – I will illustrate the important, wider socio-political implications of Malabou's thinking to be drawn out of her thought especially with regards to the 'brain' as a metaphor for thinking through the construction of shared socio-political life.

Secondly, I propose that Malabou fails to explore the crucial similarities between the operation of *gewohnheit* [habit] in Hegel and *geworfenheit* [thrownness] in Heidegger, missing an opportunity to bolster, validate and significantly enrich her rapprochement between the two figures. By reading Hegel and Heidegger together, a shared vision of an immanent, groundless subject emerges whose existence is a matter of habitual construction. Attendant to this, the novel, and, I argue, contemporaneously important, connection of the specifically *epistemic* role of affect in each thinker's account of habit will be put in relief. Lastly, I will argue that Malabou's concept of plasticity, supplemented by the reading of habit I perform, helpfully negotiates between the impasses between the two dominant camps of materialism and their attendant political prescriptions for transformation: Deleuzian reformist micropolitics and Neo-Hegelian (Badiou, Žižek and Johnston) revolutionary macropolitics.

2.1 Habit as the Sculpting of Plasticity

The problem with an ontology of plasticity is the problem one faces with all ontological claims: ontological claims cannot legitimately make any intrinsic positive claim to the way things *should* be, but rather seek to ascertain and articulate how things *are*. Ontology is the study of Being, the nature of what and how things exist. Malabou's project to elaborate an immanent new materialism grounded in the principle of plasticity, is, at base, as I demonstrate in the first chapter, such an ontological venture. We must be clear, then,

about what plasticity precisely means and demarcate its legitimate purview. As Malabou expressly states plasticity is not a *quality* of Being – something that could be substituted out, a garment to be taken off, hung on a chair, something it could at some time *not be* – it is the essence of Being as such: “*Being is nothing but its plasticity*” (Malabou, *PDW* 36). This formulation of equivalence is unequivocal. To reiterate again, then, what plasticity is: plasticity designates the giving, reception and annihilation of form. Being is nothing but its plasticity, means, then, that Being is nothing but the giving, reception and annihilation of form (that is, of matter). Malabou writes:

Existence reveals itself as plasticity, as the very material of presence, as marble is the material of sculpture. It is capable of receiving any kind of form, but it also has the power to give form itself. Being the stuff of things, it has the power to both shape and to dissolve...(*PDW* 81)

Existence, as plasticity, then reveals itself simply as a malleable substance that can form itself (nonorganic matter possesses its own active agency) and be formed in equal capacity (is passive and receptive as well). Plasticity is rendered, in Malabou’s formulation above, equivalent to marble: it is the ‘material of presence’ to be sculpted. Remember that this material ‘presence’ is not substantial or essential in the traditional metaphysical sense: it does not designate an absolute foundation. As Malabou’s reading of Heidegger makes clear, every form, every instantiation of being, of presence as such, is always already (*ex*)*changed*: every form, every instantiation of being, every instance of presence is always already *an entry into* form, being or presence. There is an ontological anteriority of fashioning – change, transformation, mutability – over that of metaphysical essence and, as such, there is nothing that cannot be changed again: the accidental and the essential or contingency and necessity are here rendered strictly equiprimordial. Plasticity thus names, ontologically, the *change of this originary change*: the contradictory economy of matter comprised of the giving, receiving and annihilating itself in the absence of a first substantive ‘nature’. Being, existence, form, materiality – the litany of designations under which Malabou names this presence of life – is simply only the capacity to change, stay the same or not: this is the systemic law of the deconstructed – that is, the disclosed as ateleological and contingent – real. In this way, plasticity, as

being, as the Real, as matter merely (ex)changing itself in a senseless seesaw of formation, reformation and destruction, prescribes and promises nothing. It merely provides an ontological argument for contingency and possibility: as Malabou writes, simply, “it could have been otherwise, it could not have been otherwise” (*FH* 163). The primary import of plasticity, then, cannot, in a strict sense, be identified as positive – it cannot and does not prescribe any activity as it designates merely ontological possibility as the malleable substance of existence, which is not inherently progressive or good in itself – but is restricted rather to a largely negative function in that it provides an ontological bulwark against any claims made to transcendent necessity as such. As Malabou writes, “[w]hen identity tends towards reification, the congealing of form, one can become victim of highly rigid frameworks whose temporal solidification produces the appearance of unmalleable substance” (Malabou, *PDW* 81). In the event that we become victim to frameworks that acquire “the appearance of unmalleable substance” (ibid.) – such as the contemporary appearance of the absolute naturalization of late capitalism – the ontological real of plasticity invalidates, in principle, any such purported metaphysical necessity, irreversible solidification or complete naturalization. However, again, this is merely ‘the awakening of consciousness of plasticity’ that Malabou petitions for in *WB*: while serving an important negative function, it does not provide a requisite positive corollary for subjective enactment. The question, posed in Heideggerian terms, is: if plasticity is *ontological* Being, how does plasticity manifest or express itself *ontically*? That is, how do we *use* our plasticity, how do we use the malleable material of presence, as marble is the material of sculpture? In Hegelian terms, how do we make our consciousness of plasticity not just in-itself but for-itself? To formulate the question as such leads one into an impasse: to exhort one to ‘use’ their plasticity is tantamount to saying that one should ‘use’ their Being, use their plastic ‘marble’. But *you always already are plastic*: it is merely the movement of matter into different forms. To say, then, that we need to ‘use’ our plasticity thus seems conceptually empty if one follow’s Malabou’s argument to this logical end; to ‘use’ plasticity is, in a sense, unintelligible as it merely constitutes, as Malabou identifies, the materiality of which life is composed. Plasticity thus requires a commensurate mode of expression, a manner in which it can be

embodied and used. How does plasticity manifest itself in the subject and how does one put plasticity to work?

Plasticity is put to work in the realm of the subject and the world through the phenomenon of habit. Habit is the material manifestation of plasticity, comprising a commensurate modality of embodied activity that exhibits plasticity's double valences of the passivity and activity of form. Habit entails, at once, the passivity of reception – one is formed by and through habits unconsciously – and the activity of formation – habits are inculcated through both conscious and unconscious repetition and practice – circumventing the traditional deadlock of binary thinking through conceding the constitutive dialectical interplay between both passivity and activity in constituting the subject and world. Malabou describes habit as “the plastic operation which makes the body into an instrument” (*FH* 38): habit is the instrument which performs the sculpting of plastic material into its forms, it is the “work of art of the soul” (*FH* 25). It is the manner through which the indeterminate and undifferentiated substance of plastic material is progressively sculpted into a differentiated and determinate form: “[h]abit's contribution to the work of formation and culture is...analogous to the moulding gesture of the sculptor” (Malabou, *FH* 68). In *FH*, Malabou argues for the fundamental role that habit plays for Hegel's thinking of subjectivity by performing a reading of the “Anthropology” section in Hegel's *Philosophy of Mind*. Here, habit plays a decisive role in the transition from universal substance (marble) to singularized subject (sculpted marble), being the operation through which the body and soul, in dialectical interplay, sublimate their perceived externality and come to be at home with one another “as the sensuous medium of spirit” (Malabou, *FH* 73).

2.2 Habit in *Philosophy of Mind*: Passive Reception of Form in the Habituation of the Body

The *Philosophy of Mind*, in which Hegel's discussion of habit is found, is the third installment of Hegel's encyclopedia, following the *Philosophy of Nature*. The *Philosophy of Mind*, divided into Subjective and Objective Spirit, thus seeks to trace the manner in which the human mind develops *immanently* out of nature itself. Contrary to conventional wisdom regarding Hegel – the 'idealist' par excellence of ethereal spirit and disembodied rationality – the *Philosophy of Mind* proffers a highly materialist, affective account of the process by which the individual comes to be, in an important phrase for Hegel, aware and *at home* in its own body by tracing the development whereby consciousness emerges from embodied sensations or feelings (*PM* §410, 144). Hegel emphasizes the *pre-reflective processes* – the contraction of habits – prior to reflective, intentional consciousness by which the body develops affective, physiological and cognitive habits that permit the body to attain the functional homeostasis required to be an operative, embodied individual. Hegel's conception of the genesis of subjectivity and reason is not the story of an independent, disembodied or ethereal mind which activates a pre-formed container of a body but is far more attentive than usually credited to the emotional and affective components of physiological experience that *necessarily* precursor our capacity for intentional consciousness and rational reflection. For Hegel, “*Everything is in sensation* (feeling): if you will, everything that emerges in conscious intelligence and in reason has its source and origin in sensation” (*PM* §400). That is, the subject emerges out of an ontogenetic process of which it is equally a product as much as it is producer; first being the former, and then coming to retroactively become the latter.

The trajectory of the “Anthropology” in the Subjective Spirit division of the *Philosophy of Mind* consists in tracing the development of the self via its gradual habituation to its own body to the point at which conscious reflections and individuality proper emerges.

Hegel begins with what he calls the Natural Soul. The Natural Soul comprises the “universal substance” – in the sculptural analogy of Malabou, the piece of marble – that each individual inherits and which becomes the subsequent material basis of all individual sculpturing and formation (Hegel, *PM* §391). Enfolded within the designation of the Natural Soul are all those determinations that constitute the indeterminacy of the self’s ground, those contingent but necessary aspects of one’s life that one must take up but did not choose such as geography, nationality, ethnicity. Hegel also identifies, as falling under the purview of the Natural Soul, congenital elements such as talent, temperament and character. This stage corresponds precisely to what Malabou designates in *WB* as the ‘neuronal’ or ‘proto-self’: the, in a word, ‘hardware’ that one is born with in regards to genetic inheritances and determinations. As Malabou writes:

although Hegel could not yet express himself in the idiom of the ‘neuronal’ and the ‘mental’, his constant preoccupation was the transformation of the mind’s natural existence (the brain, which he still calls the ‘natural soul’) into its historical and speculative being (*WB* 81)

We can here, then, for Malabou, directly correlate what Hegel designates the ‘Natural Soul’ with the brain, particular the ‘neuronal’ brain or ‘proto-self’, as they operate in a structurally homologous manner in the constitution of the subject. The Natural Soul comprises the equivalent of the biological brain at the moment of the neuronal ‘proto-self’ – the subjectively unsculpted but objectively endowed material that will constitute the basis of the self – prior to the subject’s own concerted activity and self-formation in the emergence of the properly ‘mental’ brain or ‘core’ and ‘autobiographical self’ (the historical, cultural and reflective dimensions of the subject).

The next moment in the emergence of the subject is what Hegel calls ‘The Feeling Soul’ which moves through the triadic moments of universal-particular-individual/singular (these last two can be used interchangeably): the feeling soul in its immediacy (universal), self-feeling (particular) and, finally, habit (individual). The feeling soul in its immediacy could be described as the subject being “in itself” and not yet “for itself”, still in “darkness” (Hegel, *PM* §404) as an “infinite treasury of sensations” (Hegel, *PM* §403);

“it is...immediate, not yet as its self, not a true subject reflected into itself” (Hegel, *PM* §405). This is the human being in its sheer corporeity where the feelings and sensations are its mode of being – there is, as of yet, no self-differentiation. The next moment, what Hegel calls self-feeling, constitutes the point at which the self begins to distinguish itself from its feelings transitioning from the *universality* of feeling in its immediacy to the *particular* moment of self-feeling where the individual inchoately begins to feel that these feelings are *its* own: it is “essentially the tendency to distinguish itself in itself, and to wake up to the *judgment in itself*, in virtue of which it has *particular* feelings and stands as a subject in respect of these aspects of itself” (Hegel, *PM* §407). This is a moment of diremption in the self. For example, a child who feels hunger cries out as this feeling stands over and against them as something intrusive or alien: the child does not countenance that this feeling of hunger is something that is part of its being, but feels as if it is something which is hostile to it and over which it has no control. The child involuntarily responds to this feeling and his whole being is consumed by this feelings of hunger until it is fulfilled – there is no expectation – which would be born of habit – that it will soon satiated in the future. The same can be said for learning how to walk or speak: the inability to perform these tasks is something which frustrates the neophyte because they are not part of, in Hegel’s language, the self’s ‘essential’ being; they are contingent and accidental, outside of the self. In this moment of development the individual essentially experiences its body and attendant passions, ideas, inclinations, capacities as externalities which it is subject to instead of conceptualizing it as part of its being; the subject, here, at the level of the particularity of self-feeling, the self, is *alienated* from itself.

The next stage, that of habit, is the corrective to this moment being the plastic operation through which the subject, through a sculptural process of practice and repetition, comes to integrate these accidents, contingencies or particularities as features of its own self through a process of habituation by which the self internalizes these different externalities and comes to be individuated and at home in them. The depiction of habit, in Hegel, is a double moment, involving the two dominant aspects of plasticity: the passive reception of form and the active donation or reformation of form. As Malabou observes, “in the etymology of the word habit we discover the Latin word *habere*: habit is a way of

‘having’, and in this sense, a kind of possession, a property” (*FH* 37). Habit then describes the process of ‘making one’s own’, of coming ‘to have’ which creates a particular way of being (Malabou, *FH* 37): the concerted construction and maintenance of habits is our way of being-at-home-with-oneself and one’s world (Hegel, *PM* §410, 144). Habit first appears as the passive phenomenon through which the body auto-poetically forms itself by “reducing the particulars of feelings (and of consciousness) to a mere feature of its being” (*PM* §410). This is the process whereby the ‘soul’ (the brain or mind Malabou argues) incorporates into itself the initially alien particularities of sensation so it “has them and moves in them, without feeling or consciousness of the fact” (Hegel, *PM* §410)²⁷. The emergence of the subject, for Hegel, is subtended by this plastic movement of the body auto-organizing itself through the contraction of habits, as the body’s corporeality is moulded without rational intervention or consciousness. Hegel offers the examples of one’s development of eyesight where the eye habituates itself to light and the gradual shaping of the body in the development of one’s upright posture (Hegel, *PM* §410). These pre-reflective processes arguably extend to the auto-organization of the body itself in regards to, for instance, skin tissue, organs, the circulatory system and, in the case of the brain, the economy of synaptic circuitry. This phase of habit in the ontological constitution of the subject exemplifies the movement of plasticity: matter actively forms itself and the self passively acquires form, unconsciously, in the development of its body and bodily capacities. This originary activity and passivity of matter enables the self to take form and exist as in appropriating and internalizing these externalities of self-feeling, “the soul is freed from them, so far as it is not interested in or occupied with them” (Hegel, *PM* §410). Becoming habituated to – that is, at-home-in – the clamourings of its desires, needs, etc. the individual becomes “open to be otherwise occupied and engaged” (Hegel, *PM* §410). This passive phase of habit, through which the body habituates itself into a functioning homeostasis, creates the very possibility of the emergence of conscious, reflective self and concerted, creative

²⁷ Here, Hegel’s description of the process of habit in the constitution of the body anticipates Deleuze’s argument, found in *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, that it is *passive* rather than *active* syntheses – as Kant argues – which originally constitute the ground of the self’s individuation and being-in-the-world.

activity. The passive syntheses of habit “form the condition of the soul’s liberation, of its attaining objective consciousness” (*PM* §410), establishing the stability required for the subject to both participate in future self-directed initiatives and withstand future encroachments from and encounters with its external material environs. Habit is the activity through which the body is prepared to incorporate accidents that inevitably surface in the course of experience, being the “process whereby the contingent becomes the essential” (Malabou, *FH* 74): habit permits the existence of unity – the maintenance of the guise of the essential – in a world composed of externalities and accidents.

Translated into the neuro-vocabulary of *WB*, this passive operation of habit constitutes an extension of the work of the ‘neuronal’ brain, being the development and modulation of synaptic connections and the co-ordination between the networks of the body to transform and adapt itself naturally, without conscious or rational direction, in response to certain experiences of the outside such as, for instance, things as banal as gradual inurement to heat or cold or habituation to feelings of discomfort or hunger. When the self finally develops the capacity for reflection and intentional consciousness it enters, decisively, *in media res* of an affective, embodied, biological and synaptic life already very much long in the making through the unconscious work of habit. Our bodies and their ability to exist and consist in the world are a result of manifold repetitions, practices and unreflective processes – that is, a network of habits – which we do not choose to participate in but comprise the very conditions of possibility for being an individuated self.

The appearance of the sublating work of habit – which creates and constitutes the material body – marks the emergence of the Actual Soul and the beginning of the *Phenomenology of Mind* section of the Encyclopedia, the abridged condensation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which is then followed by the development of Objective Spirit. The Actual Soul – the becoming-conscious brain-body – compromises the point at which subject splits from substance in the immanent emergence of the reflective, conscious self; in the vocabulary of *WB*, it is the immanent emergence of the ‘mental’ from the ‘neuronal’ or the ‘social’ from the ‘biological’ self. Here begins the proper starting point of habit as the ‘work of art of the soul’ as it is precisely here that the self is thrown into its historical and cultural situation, marking the beginning of the active

process of its sculpting a ‘second’ nature. The operation through which the body came to be-at-home-with- itself through habit – via a dialectic of accident and essence, or externalization and internalization, of making what appears outside oneself one’s own – functions homologously in the sphere of personal experience as the self sculpts its essentially inherited body through historical and cultural experience, exposing itself to newness and difference and incorporating these encounters as essential parts of its own identity. Thrust into the world, the self begins its lifelong process of *giving itself shape*, both erasing and transforming its initial indeterminate shape through developing and acquiring variegated skills, aptitudes, predilections – one learns to play sports, board games, language, math problems, reading, social manners, culinary preferences – subjecting oneself to different experiences that progressively hew the undifferentiated material of one’s original ‘template’, marble or plasticity into a determinate form that becomes its singularized self. It is crucial to understand however, to understand both habit and Hegel, that this form of the self does not exist in advance of or precede its composition: the self is *only* its own process of composition. It is here, in examining the dialectic of habit formation in the constitution of the self, that traditional criticisms of the movement of *Aufhebung* can be shown to have missed the mark. In the dialectic, conventionally understood, difference is mollified or colonized in the reinternalization of this contradiction in the reassertion of a previous substantial identity. While it is clear in the movement of habit formation that externalities are indeed reabsorbed, ‘made one’s own’, this appropriative movement is made at the expense of a fundamental transformation of what constitutes the ‘essential’ or ‘identity’ itself. Whereas textbook readings of Hegel see difference as being violently domesticated and subsumed into a prefashioned and stable identity that was there in the beginning and maintains itself through its encounter, what these criticisms of Hegel’s ‘difference-subsuming’ miss is that the encounter with difference and its reincorporation *performatively* generates a new identity in this movement of this reabsorption: the self’s encounter with difference is an exposure of its identity to transformation. There is no *return* or smooth protraction of the same, but a folding in of the aleatory at the level of structure which *changes* the essential itself: the contraction of a habit – of making one’s own – is the performative generation of a new form of the self that did not pre-exist this process but was precisely generated in

its movement. For example, when beginning to read Hegel, I approach the body of his work with an immediate/universal/abstract idea of what I think Hegel 'is' gleaned from experience. In beginning to actually read his work, his thought appears as a difference or externality which resists my attempts to easily digest or understand his thinking – it is not part of me, but exists as a particularity that is separate from me. Through habituating myself to Hegel's thought through repeatedly reading – making myself familiar with the movement of the dialectic, the language of the universal-particular-individual, the logical exposition of the system, etc. – I begin to incorporate Hegel's thinking into myself, except, this new familiarity with Hegel is transformative: 'I' internalize Hegel, but Hegel's thought changes the complexion of that 'I'; it becomes 'part' of me, but this 'me' is in itself a difference produced in the erasure of the previous 'me' by this encounter. To return to Malabou's illustration of habit via the analogy of sculpture, when the piece of marble – the self's identity – is struck by a chisel – difference – it remains 'itself' but definitively *changes* form: it is not the same but it is still 'itself'. With repeated activity or practice – chiseling – the shape of the self becomes more defined and ingrained: it becomes a habit and a determinate feature or contour of the 'marble' and not merely a fleck or a chip.

2.3 Hegel, Heidegger and the Passive Reception of Social Form: Habit and World

While Malabou highlights the role of habit in the ontological constitution of the individual, she neglects to connect her reading of habit with the homologous function that it plays in Hegel's Objective Spirit, the realm of ethical or shared socio-political life. While this may be said to exceed the purview of her work in *FH*, illustrating this connection importantly vindicates and bolsters the purported socio-political import of her thinking as announced in *WB* To recapitulate how habit essentially functions, it is a

dialectic of familiarity and alienation: an externality appears over and against an individual, and the individual, to assuage this discomfiting split, must internalize or make this externality its own. This ‘making one’s own’, coming to be ‘at home’ with oneself and the world, is achieved through habit and the process of habituation, comprising a sculpting of the self into a determinate form through its encounters, activities and practices. In a structurally correlative manner to that of the self inheriting a body over which it has no initial choice in the *Philosophy of Mind*, the *Philosophy of Right* concerns how the self is similarly habituated or thrown into an equally unchosen matrix of external determinants – social, historical, cultural, political and all the intricate inter-stitching that these separate designations entail – which it must initially take up. Much like the role that habit plays as an auto-appropriative mechanism in achieving a functional homeostasis of the body, there is a prepared socio-ideological field that the subject necessarily enters and habituates itself to: it is initially a part of a social *body*. This process of enculturation or *bildung* functions in the same triadic syllogism as habit in the realm of subjective spirit: there is the *universal* – the indeterminate objective substance, the plastic undifferentiated marble of the self – which then proceeds dialectically to the *particular* – the initial inscription of the subject by ethical substance, comprised of unconscious or unchosen norms, values, techniques, modes and kinds of practical *savoir* which are solidified through the repetition of habitual practices – to the *singular* stage whereby the individual becomes conscious and can reflect and then choose to rationally self-determine itself in accordance to its own will or retroactively change what has come presently to determine it, i.e., the subject can begin to actively sculpt itself, objectively externalizing itself in the world and not just be passively moulded by exterior forces. Again, this becomes a movement of incorporation whereby the subject habituates – in the etymological sense of habit as making one’s own, possessing, appropriating – itself in regards to certain values, norms and practices causing them to lose their externality and become part of the individual, thus allowing them to move freely within them and through them as an expression of one’s own freedom and will and not an imposition from an ‘inauthentic’, alien authority. The ‘external’ world that one enters provides the determinative content of the human’s individuation. This determinative content is not, however, implanted or endowed by some *deus ex machina* that miraculously forms a natural, fixed essence to a

particular subject. The determinative content is provided by the substance of community into which one is thrown and which you only acquire through repeated practices or habits. It is in no way essential – in the sense of immutable – as it is constantly enacted and reaffirmed through one's everyday, habitual activity. By conceiving of habit in this way, Hegel shows that the individual is in perpetual, even if infinitesimal, motion and, as such, is always an *open* project, an ateleological entity in a process of constant sculpturing, capable of transformation, re-shaping and new directions.

What insisting upon the legitimacy of this redoubling of habit accomplishes is a way to conceptualize the import of habit for socio-political life and how to understand the relationship between the self and its world. Like the passive genesis of the body in *PM*, the individual is similarly habituated into the world. However, the habituation that occurs in *PR* is of a decidedly different nature than that of *PM*: whereas *PM* traces the immanent physiological and ontological constitution of the body and the emergence of consciousness (akin to Deleuze), the habits that *PR* is concerned with are symbolic or normative and regard the wider, macro-registers of Malabou's thought that were discussed in Chapter One. That is, the individual is an immanent, embedded nodal point in a larger habitus of the closed structure or economy of *Geist*: a collective mind or social brain composed of symbolic and normative habits which both sculpt and are sculpted by individual activity; that is, they are habits they we ourselves make either through maintaining the ones we inherit or transforming them, sculpting new ones. Here, the dialectic of habit formation that occurs at the ontological-individual level in *PM* must be transposed scalarly to a larger dialectic of individual and world. Returning to the metaphor of sculpture, the world into which the individual is thrown is *itself* a piece of plastic marble that is being shaped and formed consciously or unconsciously by human activity. *Geist*, the collective mind, the social brain – whatever name one chooses – all constitute 'second natures' as they are not given or natural – even though they often appear to be – but are precisely the ongoing result of cultivated habits or praxis. Self-sculpting and world-sculpting, are, then, dialectically entangled. That is, there is no distinction to be made between one's own subjective life and the objective world: the objective world – *Geist*, collective mind or social structures – is only the calcification of

habitual practices repeatedly performed by human actors that has, through the repetition of these practices, achieved the appearance of naturalcy, solidity or inertia.

The problem is that, because the objective or socio-political world we are thrown and habituate ourselves into, that is, become familiar or at-home-with, is precisely a ‘second nature’ created by habit, like habit, it effaces or obscures the contingency of its own grounds. One of habit’s fundamental characteristics is this amnesic quality of self-forgetting: in becoming habitual – familiar or at home – ways of being and ways of thinking become inconspicuous and naturalized. Paradoxically, it is because we are constituted primarily of and by habits that we forget that they are habits in the first place and thus take them to be natural, necessary or unmalleable instead of what they are: fundamentally plastic habits – ways of being in, thinking about and organizing the world – that we ourselves can either change or maintain. Here, Hegel and Heidegger are proximate in their diagnosis of the relationship between the self and its world – a contiguity that Malabou seemingly overlooks. For all of Malabou’s sensitivity to etymology – her project is essentially predicated on the enlargement of the semantic field of plasticity to an ontological register – she curiously fails to detect or pursue the crucial connections between the operation of habit or *Gewohnheit* in Hegel and two of Heidegger’s most central neological constructions: being-in-the-world and *Geworfenheit* or, as its translated, *thrownness*. The most fundamental constitutive feature of Dasein, Heidegger argues, is “being-in-the-world” (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 53/53). Heidegger glosses the etymology of being-in as it pertains to Dasein as such:

‘In’ stems from *innan-*, to live, *habitare*, to dwell. ‘An’ means I am used to, familiar with, I take care of something. It has the meaning of *colo* in the sense of *habito* and *diligo*. We characterized this being to whom being-in belongs in this meaning as the being which I myself always am. The expression “*bin*” I connected with “*bei*.” “Ich bin” [“I am”] means I dwell, I stay near...the world as something familiar in such and such a way. Being as the infinitive of “I am”: that is, understood as an existential, means to dwell near..., to be familiar with...*Being-in is thus the formal existential expression of the being of Dasein*

which has the essential constitution of being-in-the-world (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 54/54-5).

As Heidegger elaborates above, ‘being-in’ intimates a number of valences: to dwell or inhabit a world we are used to, familiar with, near or close with. The constitutive nature of Dasein as *being-in* is thus dwelling, dwelling in a world that is familiar, that we take care, that we inhabit. We could expand this etymological field by pointing out the close proximity of the word for ‘to dwell’ or ‘to live’, *wohnen*²⁸ and the word for habit, *gewohnheit*. *Gewohnheit*, the word for habit, means to get used or accustomed to, to accustom oneself to^{29,30}. Related words *gewohnlich* and *gewohnt* both suggest normal, ordinary or customary, everyday life, in one’s usual manner^{31,32}. Thus, enfolded within the designation of Dasein’s being-in as dwelling is a robust, interconnected semantic field of connotations at play regarding habit and the associated valences of accustoming, the ordinary, the customary, ‘one’s’ usual way of living. Heidegger’s central neologism of *geworfenheit* [thrownness] thus essentially means ‘thrown habit’, designating how we are ineluctably thrown *into* habits, ways of being, that predate and exceed us. Teased out, this rich collection of interlinked semantic registers suggest that Dasein’s being-in-the-world can be, in a sense, be understood as *thrown habitual dwelling*; they, in Heidegger’s sense, equiprimordially co-implicate one another: dwelling is always thrown, and being thrown is always a habit and a habit (*habitat*, *habitus*) is always dwelling. Heidegger’s neologism

²⁸ “wohnen”. *Oxford Duden English German Dictionary: German English*. London: Oxford University Press, 2000. Retrieved through University of Western Ontario. Electronic Edition.

²⁹ “gewohnheit”. *Oxford Duden English German Dictionary: German English*. London: Oxford University Press, 2000. Retrieved through University of Western Ontario. Electronic Edition.

³⁰ Another sense of habit is that of “clothing”. When Heidegger speaks of Dasein being naked, thrown before itself in anxiety stripped of the familiarity of the world, one can think that, in this moment, Dasein has been de-habited, dis-robed of its socio-symbolic dressing (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 343/327)

³¹ “gewohnlich”. *Oxford Duden English German Dictionary: German English*. London: Oxford University Press, 2000. Retrieved through University of Western Ontario. Electronic Edition.

³² “gewohnt”. *Oxford Duden English German Dictionary: German English*. London: Oxford University Press, 2000. Retrieved through University of Western Ontario. Electronic Edition.

*geworfenheit*³³ accentuates an important element of movement that is somewhat absent in ‘habit’, capturing a vital sense of motion that is obscured by the predominant sense of habit as something static. Habits are continually in motion as they consist primarily of practices: habits only maintain their potency in being acted out, in being practiced. Because of their familiarity, habits attain and exude a kind of inertia, but this is only an outward semblance as their force is maintained only by repeated action and praxis³⁴.

For both Hegel and Heidegger, then, the subject or *Dasein* unreflectively comports itself in the world because, one, initially and for the most part, is always already taken over by the world precisely because the self or *Dasein* is habituated or *thrown* into its world. There is no ‘I’ that precedes its symbolic inscription; the ‘I’ is always, in Heidegger’s terms, thrown and thus, in a sense, inherited or bestowed: you are always already sculpted, there is always already a form in place. Heidegger writes, “[i]nitially, ‘I’ ‘am’ not in the sense of my own self, but I am the others in the mode of the they [*das Man*]. In terms of the they, and as the they, I am initially ‘given’ to ‘myself’” (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 129/125). Heidegger’s designation of *das Man* or ‘the they’ or ‘the one’ is strictly equivalent to Hegel’s notion of ethical substance. By *das Man* Heidegger wishes to designate the ‘one’, the way in which ‘one’ does things, meaning, socially normative practices, mores, values. *Das Man* or ethical substance thus designates the possibilities, the social habits or normative, inconspicuous ways of social being, that are pre-circumscribed in the world into which we are thrown: they are the familiar ways of being that we initially must identify with and internalize to be recognized individuals at all. As Heidegger writes, “*Dasein* is the they and for the most part it remains so” (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 129/125), meaning, we, for the most of our lives, dwell in accordance to the habitual way that our world values, judges, thinks: “[i]f *Dasein* is familiar with itself as the they-self, this also means that the they prescribes the nearest interpretation of the world and of being-in-the-world” (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 129/125). That is, we

³³ There is perhaps something to be done with the relation of *geworfenheit*, *gewohnheit* and *verworfenheit*. *Verworfenheit* means abjectness, depravity.

³⁴ This resembles Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of the practico-inert outlined in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960).

always arrive to ourselves, our field of possibilities already circumscribed, just like finding ourselves in the middle of an already constituted body in Hegel's *PM*, *in medias res* as we have always already unreflectively taken over assumptions, perspectives and ways of orienting ourselves to and in the world: the they, the way 'one' does things, our social habits are the conditions of possibility of our very existence.

For Hegel and Heidegger then, one always begins from a situation of thrownness – or habituated dwelling – in where the world, because it is habituated, appears natural and necessary. We live, for the most part, in the way, in Heidegger's excellent phrase, that 'one' does things, we think the way 'one' thinks "without", as Hegel writes, "moral consternation and without the vanity of claiming to know better" (*PR* §144). We simply act in our routine and habitual ways of being because we are at home-in-the-world and there is no discord between the self and its situation. However, merely acting mechanically in accordance with the given habits of your particular socio-historical situation does not, for either Hegel and Heidegger, accurately reflect the reality or true possibility of the individual human subject or Dasein: for Hegel, this does not comprise genuine 'freedom' and, for Heidegger, one's entanglement in *das Man* constitutes inauthentic rather than 'authentic' existence. What engenders the possibility of becoming 'free' or 'authentic' for Hegel and Heidegger is a rupturing of the tranquility of habit, the emergence of a feeling of *not-being-at-home*. As was the case in Hegel's account of habit in *PM*, there occurs homologously in socio-political life, for Hegel, a moment of diremption, deracination or disjuncture, affective in nature, in where the self realizes itself as an independent, particular entity over and against which looms an alien externality or object from which it stands fundamentally apart. Correlatively, in Heidegger, Dasein is pulled from the immersion or absorption in the average everydayness of the *das Man* through a feeling of anxiety which causes a similar separation to institute itself between the self and its world, bringing "Dasein before its ownmost thrownness...reveal[ing] the uncanniness of everyday, familiar being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 342/327). To be 'free' or 'authentic', then, is contingent upon a certain kind of break with given habits, with the familiar ways of being-in-the-world. This reflective rupture leads the individual to cognize its own being as something with heft, with a genuine existence independent of how 'one' does things: it is, in the language

of Hegel, the moment of particularity where the universal immediacy of ethical substance is cut by the inchoate emergence of the subject, an individual person aware of its own desires and thoughts that may diverge from the typical way ‘one’ thinks things (in Malabou’s language from *FH*, the rupturing of Greek Subjectivity and the advent of Modern Subjectivity). In Heidegger, this moment of affective disjuncture inaugurates the possibility for seeing Dasein’s *own* possibility: in breaking from its entanglement in *das Man*, Dasein discloses to itself that it can think, want and potentially live differently than is circumscribed by the dictatorship of *das Man*, the way ‘one’ does things. The breaking of habit, the affective feeling of *not-being-at-home* with oneself, then, prompts a moment of revaluation where the self is afforded a space of minimal autonomy in which it can reappraise its position within the world in which it has hitherto been unreflectively immersed.

The breaking of habit, however, only inaugurates the space of possibility, leading to two possible responses, which, in the language of Heidegger, could be designated as ‘inauthentic’ or ‘authentic’ and, in Hegel, particular versus singular. Recognizing itself as a particular individual independent of ethical substance, the subject, for Hegel, initially responds by seeing the “laws and powers” of ethical substance as an “eternal justice, as gods that are in and as themselves, over against which the vain doings of individual humans remain merely an ever-undulating play” (*PR* §145). The world, ethical substance, the habits and ways that people do things, “relates to the subject as something that simply *is*, in the highest sense of self-sufficiency. In this respect, it is an absolute authority and power infinitely more stable than that of nature” (*PR* §146). Ethical substance, or the way ‘one’ does things, thus confronts the self as a foreign, alien, oppressive object, an unmalleable stage upon which the individual merely acts: the objective world stands over and against the individual as something which just *is*, that exists independently of the individual’s activity and existence. This experience of alienation from the world results in what Hegel characterizes as the Unhappy Consciousness, a state in where the individual perceives itself to be changeable and unessential in contradistinction to the objective world which is essential and unchangeable (*PS* §208-9). This is the shape of consciousness which emerges precisely when the self no longer feels at home with the objective world, and the objective world comes to represent an unmalleable substance

which the self does not participate in the construction of but merely submits to. For Heidegger, this moment of diremption occurs with the affective irruption of anxiety that “fetches Dasein back out of its entangled absorption in the ‘world’” (Heidegger 182) through which “Dasein is individualized [particularized in Hegel’s language]” and “Being-in enters the existential ‘mode’ of *not-being-at-home*” (Heidegger 182-3). In the diremptive moment of anxiety, Dasein recognizes its own existence, in a homologous fashion with the Hegelian subject, as independent from *das Man* or ethical substance, becoming alienated from its habituation in its given, everyday world.

These moments in Hegel and Heidegger are connected in that the individual affectively, and subsequently, reflectively, registers that it is not strictly coterminous with or unilaterally determined by its world. However, as both Hegel and Heidegger show, Dasein or the self’s initial response to this awareness of the individual’s own possibility results in a kind of tragic dualism as the world from which the individual is alienated appears as something unresponsive to the self’s needs or desires, over which it has no control: the world appears unchangeable, while the self can only adapt or comply with the given parameters prescribed by this world of *das Man* or the ethical substance. What we have, then, here, is precisely what Malabou in *WB* designates as flexibility: Dasein or the self construe themselves as only being able to receive or adapt to form, not to actively construct or destroy form. The objective world they inhabit appears to be a transcendentalized form – an externality which they can only accede and adapt to – instead of conceiving it as it is: a plastic form that is shaped and sculpted dialectically by our own activity. Here, we have moved from the universal – the passive reception of form through our initial habituation – to the particularization of our form where the universal splits into two separate moments which, while engendering the sense of an independent self and thus opening the possibility for the self to actively sculpt itself and world, subjects this emergent individual self to the ostensibly higher, external authority of the universal (the ostensibly unmediated, naturalized objective world). The consciousness of the individual is thus split between the idea of a passive individual who receives form and an active, external world that donates form. This conception of the relation between the self and world is predicated upon precisely the dualistic, metaphysical structure that we discussed the dangers of in chapter one: this shape of consciousness asserts a thing-in-

itself (the objective world of *das Man* or ethical substance) inaccessible to human understanding and intervention, that which, nevertheless, still exerts influence over and purchase on human life. Purposefully effected, here, is the ideological occlusion of the true relationship between the terms of self and world, which are not antinomic, but speculative or dialectical: the world is not a ready-made object which exists over and against us, but is a plastic object which is sculpted by human activity – it is a phenomenon of constitutive co-habitation. Whereas the subject or Dasein is correct in apprehending their own being as constituted by habits, and thus being changeable, they fail to see the world in which they inhabit as similarly constituted by habitual – and thus historically emergent and contingent – ways of being. They fail to recognize that *das Man* or ethical substance, our shared socio-political and collective life, is not an unmalleable substance but rather a sedimentation of our *own* habits, a shared piece of marble of which we are all sculptors of and sculpted by which retains its consistency or shape only through our *own* habits or repetitive practices.

The realm of the socio-political becomes oppressive precisely when it attempts to ideologically maintain this illusory metaphysic, when it promulgates its status as fixed, unchangeable and necessary, as, in doing so, it essentially expropriates from the individual the epistemic value of its affective discontent with the world. That is, when the subject no longer feels at home in the world, this is an affective signpost that something is fundamentally awry with the objective organization of the world that they inhabit: it is no longer hospitable, failing to provide the conditions of possibility for their freedom or contribute to the flourishing of their well-being. What is something potentially transformative – the affective recognition that something is wrong and has to change in the world to make one feel at home – comes to be ideologically modulated into a depoliticized and debilitating despair in where the subject is made to feel that there is nothing it can do because the shape of the world is outside of its control. What this dualistic metaphysic achieves in structuring the individual as changeable and the world as unchangeable is that it effectively *pathologizes* affective disjuncture as being a failure on the individual's behalf to properly adapt to the world; that is, in Malabou's words, of not being *flexible* enough. Dasein or the self is made to feel guilty, inadequate or melancholic because it feels out of joint with the world and assumes the affective burden of being out-

of-order, of not working properly, as being its own personal responsibility. The self, in both Hegel and Heidegger, are then forced by default to retreat to the habitual ways of being-in-the-world and attempt to ascertain ways to make themselves at-home-again. For Heidegger, this is accomplished by the tranquilizing effects of immersing oneself again in *das Man*, disburdening oneself of responsibility by merely living how ‘one’ lives because that is the way the world ‘is’ – one lives inauthentically, but comfortably in the constant suppression of one’s affective discomfort. For Hegel, one simply succumbs and “die[s] from habituation” becoming “wholly habituated to their lives...dully spiritually and physically” letting all “activity and vitality disappear” resulting in “spiritual or physical death” (*PR* §151). By foreclosing any possibility of genuinely imagining another way of life, of erasing the notion of an actual future, and forcing the subject to merely live and act the same, this dualistic metaphysic, if it pervades and entrenches itself in consciousness, essentially subsidizes the individual’s subjection and disaffection; one can say, following Hegel, that we are, in fact, spurred to our own death: to be coerced into living in habits after they have affectively abandoned us, when spirit flees, is tantamount to goading our own suicide. Returning to the usual course of things, even when one has become disaffiliated, is to contribute to the further recalcitrance of the shape of life that produced the self’s discontent in the first place. An outcome which, important for today, is favorable to the few, but hardly to the many.

2.4 Habit in the Active Sculpting of Self and World: Putting Plasticity to Work

The moment of singularity, in Hegel’s terms, or authenticity in Heidegger, would be to grasp the mutually constitutive relation between the individual and its world and assume – take over, appropriate, make one’s own – the responsibility the individual has over deciding how it seeks to actualize its possibility for sculpting its world and own life.

While the affective disjuncture can provoke the response just detailed, it also opens up the space for a positive and transformative appropriation of this moment of being not-at-home. What opens this space, for each of Hegel, Heidegger and Malabou, is, through the epistemic affective rupture with the world, the recognition or coming to consciousness of one's own inherent capacity for, what are essentially made interchangeable terms by Malabou, respectively, negativity (in Hegel), possibility (in Heidegger) and plasticity (in Malabou): which is to say, the coming to consciousness of one's capacity for becoming different, becoming otherwise because of the essential plasticity of one's own existence. Any potential transformative, emancipatory activity, for each thinker, is conditional upon the realization of these two interconnected points: the immanent, reciprocal constitution of the self and the world and, most crucially, the fundamental plasticity of being, that is, the possibility to change and give form to yourself and the world. This is pointedly stated by Hegel when he says that governing purpose of life is to immanently realize the concept of freedom "in...externally objective aspects, making the latter a world moulded by the former, which in it is thus at home with itself, locked together with it..." (Hegel, *PM* §484). That is, the point of our existence is to make the objective world one we want to live in through our own concerted subjective activity. The reason this is possible, for Hegel, is because the subject and its world are initially a 'second nature', thrown in their being, and thus is, in a sense groundless. This groundlessness provides the subject with an inherent capacity for negativity: its fundamental contingency permits it to negate any 'thrown' or actualized determinations because, at heart, the self is pure possibility. In Heidegger, Dasein must take up this knowledge, its truth as *being-possible*, and act with fidelity to the contingency of its being to take over its life as its own and no one else's. With Malabou, she similarly calls for an acting in accordance with the 'truth' of one's being, which is, one's plasticity, the possibility of form to change. The problem here, as stated in the beginning of this chapter, is how to put this plasticity or possibility of the subject to self-determine the shape of its own life and world to work. The announcement of a need to become aware of our plasticity, our possibility to become otherwise, the *abgrund* of our being, is not new. As we have just seen, and probably are well aware, these ideas are central elements to any nominally emancipatory critical enterprise since, I argue, Hegel, but certainly since Marx. One receives form from the world and ineluctably

bestows it in turn: one either conforms to the preexisting *habitus* and thereby maintains its hegemony or breaks from one's *habitus* and reforms it through pursuing other ways of being that transform it at a structural level; if one exists one is shaping – consciously or unconsciously – the materiality of oneself, the social, the earth. The world is an immanent structure that is sculpted by human activity and praxis: here, Malabou exhibits a clear affinity and continuity with Marx. However, initially and for the most part, as Heidegger and Hegel show, one typically only deepens the cut of habitual contours in or of the world instead of forging new ones. Ostensibly, this is because we are not *conscious* of our plasticity, of the possibility that everything could be different and that we ourselves can instantiate this change. If only we could summon a consciousness of plasticity – the fact that being is intrinsically capable of the reception, donation and annihilation of form without privileging any given valence – than perhaps things would be different. Realizing the plastic materiality that constitutes the being of ourselves and world may mean we are afforded the promissory comfort of knowing things could be different, or as Malabou puts it, that there is always *another possibility* as being is plastic and hence constitutively open to change. But, while this valence is stirring, and admittedly needs to be preserved, if construed strictly in this sense the announcement of the plasticity of being, the brain, the self, our world amounts to little more than a palliative, a mantra coincident with the *de facto* anthem of the Left writ large: things can be otherwise or different, as if recognizing that things can be different is a good or end in itself. What good is possibility, or the virtuality of difference, if it never actualizes itself?

Coming to feel at-home-with-oneself and the world again can only be achieved through the work of habit, of reshaping those habits or ways of being inherited from *das Man* or ethical substance which initially formed you; as Malabou writes in *FH*, “[t]he route to recovery is the work of habit” (36). If we feel alienated from the world – not-at-home – the only way to rectify this affective disjuncture is engaging in the construction of new habits by transforming that which makes you feel disaffiliated: re-appropriating the world, making it one's ‘own’ again, by changing it. Like any therapeutic enterprise, however, the cultivation of new habits – and the withering of old ones – is a trying and difficult task. Returning to the ontological vision of plasticity outlined in the first chapter, we live in an immanent structure with no exteriority: it is merely a densely imbricated

network of finite materialities that can form, be formed and perish – like the interaction of neurons and synapses in the functioning of the brain. Matter, for Malabou, functions in the same way that neuronal connections do: pathways, forms or networks – analogically representing here structures and ways of being – are created and gain in strength with repetition and increased synaptic efficacy (long-term potentiation) and others are diminished or reduced with stimulation (long-term depreciation) leading to cell death (Malabou, *WB* 22-5). That is, simply, the shape and complexion of our brain – analogically, our shared collective mind or social structures – is either sedimented or transformed depending solely on how we act and what we do: in this way, “man (sic) is only what he does and only expresses what he *forms*” (Malabou, *FH* 68). And, these new connections, these habits, are only inculcated and ingrained or come to be through repetition, practice and commitment: the plasticity of forms – whether they be the self or the social – have a tendency to congeal, fortify or stabilize when particular activities are employed more frequently or habitually. Here, the claustrophobia of Malabou’s ontological vision emerges again: we are only what we do. There is a definitive “*impossibility of fleeing*” (Malabou, *PDW* 65; emphasis mine): the frontiers of being are inescapable, there is nowhere else to go. In this phrase, Malabou implicitly condemns and explicitly positions herself against the much vaunted Deleuze-Guattarian notion of the line of flight as the means of emancipation from ways of being that have become unmalleable and oppressive. We all feel this impulse to flee “when an extreme tension, a pain, a sensation of uneasiness surges toward an outside that does exist” (Malabou, *PDW* 65) – that is, when we no longer feel at home in the world and require new ways of being when the existing situation no longer serves our interests or well-being. “It is not”, then, “a question of how to escape closure but rather of how to escape within closure itself” (Malabou, *PDW* 65) – “the ‘way out’ is achieved by an upheaval within daily life itself” (Malabou, *PDW* 70). One can virtually flee the present, but as long as this is strictly delimited to a move of de-territorialization, the reason that one feels this “tension” or “pain” remains firmly intact: the objective socio-political world as it currently stands. One must, to relieve this existential discomfort, determinately endeavour to change the contours of the structure or dominant situation itself. To be ‘subversive’ or ‘disruptive’ by small flashes of negation does nothing to dislodge the hegemony of the habitual

world. This is the essential problem with micropolitical thinkers of a Deleuzian ilk (for instance, William Connolly and Jane Bennett). While being attentive to the nature of habits, understanding that they are difficult to form, that they take time, effort and coordination, their political prescriptions of lines of flight or guerilla style tactics of defamiliarization are incommensurate to what they are trying to achieve: the recomposition of territories or habits of being. However, rhizomes surge up and then dissipate just as quickly as they came. These insurgencies into the ossified form of the world need to be vigilantly maintained through practice, repetition, and commitment to have any true efficacy whatsoever. That is, the flash of virtuality is only that: it deracimates you from your immersion in the given, providing one with a minimal space of autonomy through which difference can be enacted (or through which a preindividual field of singularities can actualize through you). Reading the line of flight through Malabou's sculptural analogy demonstrates its inadequacy to actually transforming the real: if the form of the world is equivalent to marble, appearing as an implacable and unmalleable substance, uncoordinated and aleatory deterritorializations are equivalent to small strikes of a chisel which would be ineffective in hewing out a new contour or shape of the sculpture – the primary features of the structure remain intact.

The impasse of espousing a micropolitics that eschews any designs of self-determined 're-territorializing' is that one is consigned to merely, as Adrian Johnston describes it, "nudging and tinkering with one's selfhood" (Johnston 170) in the experimentation with different lifestyles, habits and modes of being without any substantial engagement or investment in the rearrangement of the socio-political. However, while certainly imperfect, a prescription of micropolitical 'nudging and tinkering' – an attentive modulation of habits or techniques of the self – should not itself be the target of criticism, but, rather, the focus should be more squarely placed on the failure or refusal of these micropolitical positions to situate a focus on habits of the self within a horizon of coordinated macropolitical ends. That is, there is a tendency in broadly construed micropolitical leftist thought to be allergic to anything that resembles a centralized organization, a common goal or coordinated objectives, as this would resemble something like the 'state' which is an apparatus of capture that stratifies the flows of becoming, the 'vital' energy that is being. Any organization or coordination of forces

becomes quickly territorialized and, hence, non-emancipatory because the singular desires of those involved congeal, slow down, or are effectively compromised. The orientation of such a nominally political project, here, then, is to ensure that one always escapes any mediation, anything that would compromise its virtual purity of movement. In this sense, any Deleuzian inspired thinking of emancipatory change, as Peter Hallward observes, is “essentially indifferent to the politics of this world” (162) as one of the animating thrusts of Deleuze’s thought is to be, precisely, as the name of Hallward’s book on Deleuze suggests, *out of this world*: Deleuze’s thought does not seek to change the world, or make it its own, but only insure that it does not get captured by it. The image of escape marshaled in Deleuzian thought is thus a permutation of what Malabou designates, as elaborated in chapter one, as a fetishization of an outside: the positing of a chimerical excess which eludes, and ostensibly frustrates or disrupts, the economy or closed structure of being. Yet, as Malabou urgently insists, one is always already caught up in the world: there is no outside, there is no “way out”, there is nowhere else one could exist – there is an impossibility of fleeing. The turn to the micropolitical, in this instance then, ends up being an insular quietism in the guise of radical subversion and openness to the world that does nothing to change the status quo, but only seeks to preserve its own purity in the face of contamination by the ‘corrupted’ world of actuality. The logic here, of preserving the potential or virtuality of the self as a higher good than that of actualizing oneself in the world, uncannily resembles that of a staunch libertarian who demands the right to negative freedom above all else. However, even though one ostensibly abstains from the given, objective world, one still negatively supports the existence of that world through one’s subtraction. In pursuing a bad infinity of constant, minor lines of flight and brief habits, the micropolitics of Deleuze does nothing to actually efficaciously change the way that the world is being *sculpted* but actually contributes to the maintenance of the given present in pursuing its fantasy of a possibility of being ‘else-where’, out of the world. Analogically, if one’s ship is sinking, and filling with water, you may be best not to insist on trying to find pockets of remaining space in the rising water, flitting from one temporary reprieve to another, but actually endeavour to fix the sundered hull.

Micropolitics – if untethered from a macropolitical horizon and relegated to the private pursuit of a techniques of the self – are essentially politically inefficacious and even detrimental to emancipatory change and the accomplishment of instating new ways of being-in-the-world. However, the tendency to antinomically pit a “reformist micropolitics” versus a “revolutionary macropolitics” as a response, is, I argue, equally inadmissible and depoliticizing (Johnston 158). The thinkers with whom Malabou is most frequently associated are Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek and Adrian Johnston³⁵ who all share an aversion to the micropolitical turn and exhort a return to the macropolitical in the form of a renewed dialectical materialism that is actualized through a reading of German Idealism (primarily Hegel) through Marx and Jacques Lacan. They vehemently reject the political import of any kind of micropolitical stance, citing that it has become the *de facto* ideological position that has mired the contemporary left in its own impotent deadlock of counselling endless small-scale, local practices that ostensibly exist outside and resist capitalism, but which really only further buttress it while providing the ethical palliative that one is ‘doing’ something. The broad anti-institutionalism that characterizes contemporary leftist thinking, born of Deleuze and Guatarri, has effectively led to the refutation, as argued above, of any willingness to cultivate a properly leftist hegemony which, a view that Badiou, Žižek, Johnston broadly share, following a Marxian line of thinking political resistance, is crucial to mounting an efficacious form of contesting and moving beyond ossified and oppressive socio-political situations, i.e. contemporary capitalism. However, while correct in emphasizing the need to attend to committed and organized macropolitical habitual change, in the blunt dismissal of the micropolitical this

³⁵ See for instance this characterization: “Materialist accounts of subjectivity, or transcendental materialism, are a sensibility first articulated by Adrian Johnston in his systematic reading of the work of Slavoj Žižek, which can equally describe aspects of the projects of figures such as Alain Badiou [and] Catherine Malabou...*Transcendental Materialism* can best be described as a set of basic philosophical principles shared by a group of contemporary figures. The first commonality shared by those whose work could be considered *Transcendental Materialism* (hereafter *TM*) is a shared set of references that include German Idealism, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, and Marxist Materialism. One can find this triad in the work of Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Catherine Malabou, Adrian Johnston...It could be said that each of these thinkers begins with an axiom of Marxist, or Dialectical, Materialism and then uses this axiom of Materialism to re-consider both German Idealism and Psychoanalysis, a method of interpretation most explicit in the works of Žižek...” (Burns and Smith 1, 3). Johnston also posits an explicit line of thought from “Hegel and Marx through Žižek and Malabou...” (174).

“revolutionary macropolitical” thinking is subtended and plagued by its own fantasies and problems. In dismissing gradual reformism because it both leads to a political quietism of perpetually delaying actual, revolutionary change, thus only further contributing to the maintenance of the status quo, this ‘big’ thinking relies upon the advocacy of a grand, ruptural break with the given order that would then open up the space for a re-organization of one’s socio-political situation (the representation of such thinking is found most notably in Badiou’s well-known theory of the Event). Yet, conceptualizing political transformation through a singular or exceptional Event leads to its own kind of quietism in where one similarly waits for an authentic or true break to occur in one’s situation that would permit its re-composition – it to, then, exhibits the traces of the messianic Malabou so harshly and persuasively criticizes as being fundamentally unpolitical. In the refutation of micropolitical habitual change, this eventual thinking of revolution requires a subject who, somehow, alchemizes into a committed insurrectionist at *precisely* the same time in unison with a whole collectivity of people who are unified by the same goals and ends of effectively implementing socio-political change. The ‘revolutionary macropolitical’ disconnected from any ‘reformist micropolitics’ relies upon a faint romantic religiosity of an immaculate conversion that would create a political subject *ex nihilo*. Attendant to this, the ‘macropolitical’ event – again, untethered from ‘micropolitical’ praxis – relies upon a notion that one irruptive break into the marble of the world would be enough to instantiate a sustained difference or actual new shape of being-in-the-world. Again, Malabou’s sculptural analogy here demonstrates the limits of the Event, as, in the analogy, the Event would register as one violent cut into the marble. While serving the purpose of erasing the former shape of the statue, it does not provide a determinate new one.

While Malabou is grouped with these Neo-Hegelian thinkers, her thought, in regards to political transformation, does not coincide with their prescriptions for political practice or subjectivity. For all of Žižek and Johnston’s touting of their radically faithful Hegelianism, it is actually Malabou’s thought that remains closest in fidelity to what Hegel *actually* says about socio-political transformation. Hegel writes in *PR*:

A people cannot change the entire consciousness of spirit at once, as would happen through the utter destruction of the constitution...Through the form of education [*Bildung*], there comes to be a peaceful alteration, a shedding of the old skin and a rejuvenation... (§275)

Here, the proximity of Hegel's observation of change being a 'shedding of the old skin' through a graduated process of education and Malabou's thinking concerning the sculpting of one's plastic being through a process of habit (itself intimately tied with *Bildung*) is patent. Indeed, Hegel writes that *Bildung*:

is the *art* of making human beings ethical³⁶. It considers them as natural and shows how they can be born again, how their first nature can be transformed into a second spiritual one so that what is spiritual within them becomes *habitual*" (*PR* §151; emphasis mine).

To unpack, the point here is that when the subject is thrown into the world, as we have seen through our reading of Hegel and Heidegger, they are completely at one with it. With the emergence of their own particularity – the cognizance of themselves as a self that is not wholly contiguous with their world – the subject then can deracinate from the *doxa* of the given and reflectively and critically evaluate the world that it has been thrown into: one realizes oneself as *spirit* or self-determining subjectivity, that one and one's world is one what *does* or *creates* in concert with a community of others; one is not merely a subject to the world, but subjectively participates in the construction of one's world through one's own activity. This point of deracination occurs "when spirit progresses as itself and the institutions do not alter along with the evolving spirit" and, when this happens, "true dissatisfaction arises" (*PR* §274). This "true dissatisfaction" is the affective disjuncture described earlier, the not-feeling-at-home of the self when spirit realizes the shape of the world does not accord with its own. Here, as we recall, spirit can

³⁶ The term 'ethical' in Hegel's *PR* is the third moment in the development of the socio-political subject. It is the moment which combines in itself the universality of abstract right and the particularity of morality. When the subject has sublated these two moments into its consciousness, it can participate fully in ethical life: the realization that it is produced by and produces the objective world in which it inhabits.

die from its habituation (§ 151) – when the world no longer contributes to the flourishing of its well-being or provide the objective conditions through which its freedom can be best actualized – if one merely accedes or acquiesces to the given as an unmalleable substance. However, spirit, as a reflective, self-determining consciousness or subject, can be *born again* – that is, transformed because it is fundamentally plastic – by making the shape of the world conform to its own being and once again reawaken its own vital energy and possibility. If spirit merely replicates the caricature of the world – that is, remains flexible and adaptive instead of seizing its own plasticity and actively constructing itself – it is doomed to be forever dissatisfied, becoming spiritually dull, disaffected, disaffiliated. Here, Hegel unexpectedly coincides with Spinoza and Deleuze in regards to the fundamentally political nature of affects. An apathetic subject – without desire, without the possibility to imagine a different future for itself – is, as Malabou argues reading Spinoza and Deleuze, necessary for the political exercise of power: “Sadness...involves the diminishment of my power in acting. Deleuze [reading Spinoza] shows that the duality between sadness and joy is being played by political power and power needs us to be sad in order to reduce our capacity to act and resist” (Malabou “From Sorrow to Indifference”). Here, the singularity of Malabou’s position in contradistinction to both Deleuzian micropolitics and Neo-Hegelian macropolitics can be put into relief. As we have just seen, Hegel, Heidegger and Malabou agree fundamentally with Deleuze and Spinoza that one of the primary ways that political formations maintain their governance is through the regulation of affect, which is the purview of micropolitics. The regulation of affect is achieved through modulating subjectivity vis-à-vis habits of everyday life. The problem with the micropolitics as conceived through Deleuze is that habits are meant to be broken, eluded and spurned not reinstantiated or reforged: the world is not to be re-appropriated or created by the subject, but is fundamentally hostile to the well-being or freedom of the subject and is thus only to be escaped through lines of flight. Thus, following Hegel and Malabou, the micropolitical subject, construed in this fashion, is consigned to disaffection because it does not treat the actual source of the problem: the lack of being-at-home at world that is achieved through the cultivation and creation of social habits. They misidentify the world as an intrinsic mechanism of capture – something that is *a priori* oppressive - instead of a plastic

creation that we ourselves makes which should fundamentally be a place which is hospitable to the subjects that inhabit it. The Neo-Hegelian macropolitical perspective offers a corrective to this by rightly identifying that what is required is a larger scale reorientation of socio-political habits and not merely the atomized rebellion of uncoordinated personal practices that seek to merely preserve their own negative freedom. What the macropolitical derision of the micropolitical fails to countenance, however, in its overzealous but understandable emphasis on the need to ‘think big’ or cognize larger-scale socio-political change, is that cultivation of new habits of life is contingent upon the daily, *micropolitical* practices of engaged and committed subjects who only become as such, not through a miraculous conversion, but through a graduated transformation, ‘a shedding of the old skin’, a process of patient and committed sculpting – i.e. through micropolitical habit formation – and not the alchemy of a messianic Event. To articulate this distinction in terms of Malabou’s thinking of plasticity: Deleuzian micropolitics fails to see the objective world as plastic, instead operating under the auspices of flexibility, treating the world as an unmalleable substance that is *a priori* anathema to the freedom and becoming of the individual and responds by attempting to escape, assuming positions or ‘lines of flight’ that are – illusorily – ‘external’ to or out of the world. Such fleeing, is, however, as Malabou argues, impossible, and thus this ostensible subversion leads contradictorily to only a rebuttressing of the present and further contributes to the self’s own disaffection as the source of the problem remains untreated: the problem is not the habits of the world, but the present instantiation of them. The macropolitical revolutionary perspective – touted under the name of Hegel and dialectical materialism – rightly recognizes the plasticity of being and social habits, but mistakenly vitiates the very means of realizing these changes in its derision of the micropolitical. That is, the transformation of large scale socio-political habits are always subtended by the reorientation and construction of new habits of being in the lives of individuals who realize and come to believe, have faith in, that they themselves can change. It is unproductive to shame people into thinking that they cannot make any kind of real change in the ‘everyday’ – that the only true change or politics is a revolutionary outburst or the ‘to come’ of an Event. Rather, as Malabou writes, “authenticity is only a

modified, transformed grasp of existence. There is no change of ground. The ‘way out’ is achieved by an upheaval within daily existence itself” (PDW 70).

These two moments or conceptions of what constitutes a politically meaningful materialism must be dialectically thought together, something, which, I argue, Malabou’s conception of plasticity read in conjunction with habit may provide. Malabou’s thinking situates itself in between these two extremes by being attentive to the necessity of actually engaging and constructing the world – as opposed to merely fleeing it – as well as recognizing the impossibility of thinking transformation without a micropolitical aspect. Drawing from her discussions of the brain, the materiality of our world is shaped through the habits of which it is composed: it is comprised only of the actions which we repeatedly practice, which we cut into the marble of existence. Because this materiality is fundamentally plastic, however, this means that it can always be transformed or re-sculpted. Changing the shape or form of our own life and world, however, is not only contingent upon becoming conscious of plasticity, our ability for formation and reformation, but is wholly dependent on actually put this plasticity to work. What Malabou’s thinking of plasticity shows us is that we are always already sculpted and always already sculpting ourselves and our world. In existing, we are already being given shape and giving shape to the world that we inhabit. Realizing one’s plasticity, and the plasticity which is being *qua* being, entails recognizing that we participate in this process and, not only that, we are *only* this process. One is only what one does: there is no ‘outside’, no reprieve, one is always on this speculative existential clock with their chisel in hand. This means, as Malabou writes, “that we can sometimes decide about the future...which means that there is actually something to do with it” (PDW 77). As the qualification ‘sometimes’ indicates, this position is *always* a precarious one. There are no guarantees that we will succeed in our attempts to self-determinately shape the world in which we live – as Malabou’s cruel reading of plasticity entails, one only has the *possibility* to change – you could very well not succeed – and one is faced with a myriad of other forms pushing back against you in resistance. Yet, the strongest possibility to achieve the shape or form of life that we want is through the work of habit which means beyond its familiar, passive sense, the strenuous throwing oneself into repetition, commitment, fidelity; taking the marble of the world, knowing that it can be changed, no

matter the resistance it displays, and keep chiseling, hewing, hammering, trying until something finally gives way and you forget why it was ever difficult in the first place, that is, until it becomes a habit. The element of habit that seems to always be forgotten is its intrinsically purposeful or voluntarist aspect: it takes effort to create effortlessness, it takes the experience of the unfamiliar to create the familiar. Habit always entails an exposure of oneself to the unknown, an *ekstasis* or a throwing of oneself out of oneself. The importance of re-appraising habit as a meaningful ethico-political resource is that it puts the possibility of change back into the hands of people in the everyday and implies constant engagement. Discourse around what constitutes politics proper often oscillates between extremes of radical voluntarism or defeatist reformism. Faced with an either/or mandate, one must imagine a third alternative. The attempt to think a mutual plastic sculpting of self and world through habit is such an attempt. Realizing one is always in the process of both giving and receiving form from the world, being sculpted and sculpting, would entail recognizing that we are not consigned to the contours of the thinkable prescribed by the situation or the habitus and seizing this possibility that inheres in each of us for actual, material change. Habit is the conduit through which this change is achieved: habit because change does not happen overnight, change does not happen easily and it only ever happens, solely, through our own effort. It takes fidelity, commitment and repetition; it is a Decision, a leap of faith, a pure vulnerability to the future. Habit is never cynical – it cannot be or it has already failed. We must recognize the emancipatory potential of habit and believe it so that we begin to live differently, so that we begin to extricate ourselves from the injunctions of the situation, so that we see what has been made unthinkable; through our practice of an otherwise, the otherwise becomes thinkable, changing the co-ordinates of the ‘possible’, of the given. The shape of the world to come is here now, and now, and now. You are, we are, together, sculpting it.

Conclusion

There is nothing degrading in being alive, and there is no higher spirituality within which one could have worldly being. It is only the raising of the given to something self-created that yields the higher orbit of the good... – G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* §123

The ignominy of possibilities of life that we are offered appears from within. We do not feel ourselves outside of our time but continue to undergo shameful compromises with it. This feeling of shame is one of philosophy's most powerful motifs... We lack creation. *We lack resistance to the present.* The creation of concepts in itself calls for a future form, for a new earth and people that do not yet exist – Gilles Deleuze, *What is Philosophy?* 108

What we are lacking is life, which is to say: resistance. Resistance is what we want. Resistance to flexibility... I have tried to position us at the heart of this challenge, while inviting readers to do what they undoubtedly have never done: construct and entertain a relation with their brain as the image of a world to come – Catherine Malabou, *WB* 68, 82

To return to where we began, let me again reiterate the formulation of plasticity in Malabou's thinking. As we have seen, for Malabou the materiality – the marble that is existence – comprising our world is defined by its ontological plasticity: the originary passing *into* presence or mutability of being (mutability is primordial to presence), it is the simple capacity to give, receive and annihilate form. Malabou's critical move is the sublation of traditionally conceived properties of transcendence – activity, agency, construction, openness, freedom – into conventionally understood deterministic forms: structure, system and immanent materiality itself. In essentially immanentizing transcendence as an internal property of matter itself through plasticity, Malabou responds to the necessity of elaborating a form of materialism that compellingly moves beyond the customary impasses of mechanism, determinism and reductionism. The

universalization of plasticity as the definitive nature of matter or being *qua* being is Malabou's attempt to coherently establish a feasible ontology of materiality which accounts for the possibility for material subjects immanent to this closed economy of Being to exhibit the capacity for self-determination or for self-directed change; that is, the genuine possibility of a *future* and not a fate. Plasticity is, as Malabou writes, the possibility to envisage a 'way out' when "there is no outside, no 'elsewhere'" (PDW 65), when there appears an absolute 'impossibility of fleeing'. This 'impossibility of fleeing', at an ontological level, "means first of all the impossibility of fleeing oneself" (PDW 81). Where existence presses upon us with seemingly unbearable weight, we do feel the urge to escape. However, no such escape, traditionally conceived, is possible. What plasticity provides is a way of conceptualizing a becoming-different right at the level of form or life itself; it is a way of escaping closure within the absolute closure of the world.

The main caveat with Malabou's philosophical demonstration of plasticity, as I have argued, is that, theoretically, followed to the logical end of her own elaboration of the concept, plasticity amounts to only possibility. It does not guarantee anything, but shows one only an open door for becoming otherwise. The importance of such a defense of possibility should not, however, be cynically looked askance. Arguably, such invocations of possibility, of genuine hope, should be, as Malabou writes, sheltered, protected and defended (FH 193). Indeed, one could argue that what is needed most of all today is the development of means of cultivating and then mobilizing the libidinal or affective desire that undergirds and accompanies such a notion as *possibility*. That is, we should no longer cynically distance ourselves from being attached to, invested in and believing that the world can and should be different, and that we have the capacity to enact such a change. The singularity of Malabou's articulation of possibility vis-à-vis plasticity is that it grounds this possibility in the materiality of Being itself: it is no longer merely the purview of the ephemeral 'transcendent' character of the subject, but inscribed right at the heart of the neurological or material-ontological bases of the human itself. In a way, Malabou's non-reductionist, dialectically informed reading of plasticity and neuroplasticity of the brain is a contemporary vindication of figures like Hegel, Marx, and Sartre: it epistemologically validates that, yes, we are, in fact, our own constructions. We make our own history, we are our own projects, we are our own sculptures.

Critical to realizing our plasticity, to cognizing that we our own history, our own projects and sculptures, is, indeed, for Malabou, affective in nature, entailing that “we...relearn how to enrage ourselves, to explode against a certain culture of docility, of amenity, of the effacement of all conflict...” (Malabou, *WB* 79). For Malabou, the question of ‘what should we do with our brain?’

is above all to visualize the possibility of saying no to an afflicting economic, political, and mediatic culture that celebrates only the triumph of flexibility, blessing obedient individuals who have no greater merit than that of knowing how to bow their heads with a smile (*WB* 79)

With Malabou’s emphasis on the contemporary political importance of affect, one of the future potentials for research is situating her work within a larger conversation occurring among thinkers such as Bernard Stiegler, Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, Johnathan Crary and Jodi Dean, who all, in their own way, try to think the manifold ways in which the contemporary subject is a political site of affective regulation. That is, how do contemporary habits in mediatic capitalism serve to inculcate an affective apathy and resignation, a late capitalist anhedonia, and neutralize this ‘rage’ or desire for resistance that Malabou identifies as being critical to emancipatory projects. Another way we could frame this is, how do current habits in our mediatic culture dull or seek to nullify the positive, proactive response to feeling ‘not-being-at-home’? How do we explain the current implosion of anxiety, depression and other affective “disorders” and the subsequent atomistic pathologization of these conditions to strictly personal, neurochemical imbalances? Does Malabou’s thinking of dialectical neuroplasticity – the inextricability of the self and world – provide a way to rectify the atomism of the neurochemical pharmaceutical industry by forcing us to countenance how many of the anxieties that individuals suffer, while being neurochemical, are perhaps connected to societal factors that are ultimately within our control to assuage, i.e. work precarity? How much of the pervasiveness of anxiety is actually a heuristic which evinces that people are fundamentally unhappy with the world, and much more anxiety or affective suffering is caused by institutions attributing this problem to the individual rather than the world? This, of course, connects back to one of Malabou’s primary points about the habit of

ontological dualism that subtends our dominant ways of interpreting the world: the world is preserved as right, true and unchangeable, and the individual is the one who is wrong, askew, or ‘out of order’, who fails to have the appropriate ‘skills’ or ‘neurological makeup’ to properly adapt. Malabou’s thinking of plasticity and affect, in concert with these previously named thinkers, have much to contribute to the demystification of these present, damaging truisms.

A second major line of research that should be noted, which is latent but not fully explicit in this thesis, is the relationship of Malabou to the thought of Deleuze. There is important work to be done in determining both the relationship between *and* Malabou’s indebtedness to Deleuze’s thought. Indeed, it is my own position that Malabou’s Hegel is one that is read *through* Deleuze. If one of Malabou’s primary motivating questions is *what form of Hegel and Heidegger can exist beyond their deconstruction*, another question that implicitly animates her thought – one that is not explicitly addressed yet by her – is, simultaneously, *what form of Hegel can exist beyond and after Deleuze?* Malabou’s development of plasticity may be seen as a response to this question, a question any endorsement of Hegel after Deleuze must answer. Indeed, it seems radically anti-Hegelian to not countenance the fact of the emergence of Deleuze’s thought *in* history or to simply ascribe it to something that Hegel himself could see coming – this tactic that marks some defenses of Hegel (Slavoj Žižek’s *Organs Without Bodies* is here emblematic) contravenes Hegel’s own avowed belief in the historicity of thought itself and the necessity of thought to respond to its own historical circumstances. That is, Deleuze himself, if you are a Hegelian, is *a movement of the absolute*. If thinking is attempting to grasp itself in its own times, anyone who truly follows Hegel’s assertion of the historicity of thought must grapple with the fact that Deleuze’s thought both emerged *and* took such affective hold: why is Spirit so drawn to the image of thought propounded by Deleuze? To treat everything after Hegel as a sterile repetition of Hegelian thought is to unwittingly confirm those accusations of Hegel as the ‘end of history’ or that he himself was the apotheosis of absolute knowledge. This is to say, is it not possible that it is actually more faithful to Hegelian thought to concede that Hegel himself must be sublated? And, if so, has Malabou essentially covertly done that?

Whatever the particular differences that exist between Deleuze, Malabou and Hegel, the epigraphs I have adduced at the beginning of this conclusion point towards both shared convictions and ambivalences about the fraught position we often find ourselves in relation to our world. Recognizing the world's asymmetry with how we would actually like to see it, we feel a sense of shame, a feeling of defeat, a lack of life. That is, the fundamental affective disjuncture of not-being-at-home. Each of Hegel, Deleuze and Malabou identify that what rectifies this feeling of shame, lifelessness or not-being-at-home is the construction of something which is of our own doing. As Deleuze writes, "[w]e lack creation. *We lack resistance to the present.* The creation of concepts in itself calls for a future form, for a new earth and people that do not yet exist" (*What is Philosophy* 108). Malabou, writing in *WB*, echoes Deleuze precisely: "[w]hat we are lacking is life, which is to say: resistance. Resistance is what we want. Resistance to flexibility..." (68). We only feel this lack of life, this want of resistance, this shame, because there *exists* the possibility of ourselves and world being or becoming different. When Malabou writes, then, that what we should do with our brain is not replicate the caricature of the world, she means that the only way to assuage this feeling of a lack of life, a feeling of shame, is to act in fidelity to one's plasticity and consciously attend to the construction of one's self and world not merely acquiesce to the given as, Hegel writes, "[i]t is only [in] the raising of the given to something self-created that yields the higher orbit of the good" (*PR* §123). Putting this plasticity or possibility to work, however, as we have seen, is only accomplished through the work of habit: of making the estranged world one that coincides again with one's spirit, as best one can. Only by consciously sculpting the plastic potential of our selves and world through the concerted action of habit will we be able to efficaciously embody this want of resistance, constructing a new shape of the world in which we can be at home again.

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